

Review

### **A step back in time: Into the desert**

By Caroline Sussex

**Picking up from the July issue, we continue with Caroline's report from the 2007 WAHO Conference, held in Syria. With the Conference closing, the final days in Damascus were packed with stud visits and horse parades as well as the Conference business. Much food for thought was provided in the way in which the Arabian horse has transformed over the years and several delegates were left wondering what people have done to the breed.**

#### **Thursday 26 April (continued)**

The Conference session closed at lunchtime and guests were taken to Zaman Al Khair Restaurant by kind invitation of Mohammed Hamsho for lunch and also a horse parade of the Seif Al Sham Equestrian Club and Al Ghabra Stud. Here, a track ran through the middle of the restaurant and we viewed the horses while eating lunch. Some of these horses had been crossed with Egyptian bloodlines, mainly from the Ansata Stud, but the majority of them were pure Syrian horses.

The first thing that struck many of us was the excellent short cannons and good, straight legs, good shoulders and withers with more substantial bodies than many of the show horses of today. The stallion Dinar a Ma'anagi Sbeyli cropped up in pedigrees throughout the trip and he is obviously an important sire in Syria. We saw three stallions by Swedan (Shweimet Sabbah) and they all showed the strength in the legs, body and set-on of head. The rear ends were strong too. Swedan carried the very good strain of Kheilan Krush that the Blunts sought. Two favourites here were Shams Al Ghabra of Hamdanieh Simrieh strain (Fawaz x Sultanet Al Keil), who also had strains (lines) to Keheilan Ajuz on both sire and dam side, and Bent Al Maha (Shaddad x Maha Al Sahraa) of the Seglawieh Marzakanieh strain, who had Shammar blood as well as local bloodlines. It will be interesting to see how this stud develops in time.

The next stop was the Basel Al Assad National Stud which had been set up in memory of the son of the late President of Syria and brother to the current President, Dr Bashar Assad. The beautiful mare Marmar (Kehileh Haifeh), mainly of Shammar breeding, was much admired as was the mare Gharaam (Basil x Ghorbah) of Hamdaniet Ibn Ghorab, also mainly Shammar. The Keheileh Memrahih mare, Ghamamah, struck many of us with her lovely style as did Wardet As Sabah, known as the Queen of Beauty in Syria, of the Keheileh Jaethnieh strain. The horses here race and take part in shows. The chestnut filly Lain Al Sahara by Majd (by Basil) out of Leiali Al Samr (Hamdaniet Ibn Ghorab strain) was a stunning mover and the impressive bay stallion Majd by Basil out of Mayadah (Keheilan Haifi strain) of, again, mainly Shammar breeding sired a beautiful bay filly that we all wanted to take home. Another son of Basil, Layth Al Arab, showed again the excellent leg conformation. The stallion Ma'roof was also presented, a half-brother to Majd but by Mehrez, although his movement was not as extreme as Majd's. Next out was Ya-teem (Keheilan Al Rabdah strain) of the Tai tribe and another very good Mayadeh son, Mua'l-lah, a chestnut. What a wonderful base for the stud and this is exciting for Syrian horses and breeders.

Despite some tiredness, dinner that night was not to be missed in Old Damascus as our coaches were accompanied by police escort right into the tunnels of the Souks. I was not surprised when we eventually had to walk the final few steps and how the coaches got out, I will never know! The Al Fadi and Al Jameel Stables had invited us to dinner in the Khan Asa'ad Basha, originally a hotel but in the shape of a mosque where we were feasted with live Arabic music, folk dancing (including a beautiful wedding dance) and then the amazing whirling dervishes, who put themselves into a trance to ensure they do not go dizzy with their quite stunning swirling routine. The building itself was really old and we were honoured to be allowed to be entertained in this amazing place.

#### **Friday 27 April**

Friday was a full day of the Conference.

The WAHO trophy for every country and been very well accepted and received by all.

Dr Hans Nagel, the Chairman, reported to the Conference on his discussions that were ongoing with America. He had had many meetings in America and had thought that there could be an agreement with WAHO, but it was essential that America accepted the WAHO definition in totality. The American argument had been that some stud books contained horses that were

unacceptable to the US Registry. Dr Nagel told the Conference that he was pleased to say that these horses had now been registered as pure-breds. However, there were still a very small number of horses that America would not accept and although North America had signed an agreement with South America over accepting stud books, they would not sign up to the WAHO definition as there were still 10 horses that were not acceptable. Dr Nagel said he would keep negotiating and there was applause for this as it was felt that America was such an important country of Arabian horses and WAHO really hoped they would come back as a full member. Kina Murray updated the Conference on the WAHO database and she thanked all those countries who had sent in their information. She stressed it was not a World Stud Book, but that it would be very useful for registries in the future. She asked the delegates whether they thought it worthwhile putting online the information that had been obtained, even though there are many issues that still need much work. The Conference felt it was worth putting up information that had been received so far and making it available for people.

Kina Murray informed the Conference that there had been some discussion over prefixes and suffixes as it had been suggested that WAHO hold a worldwide list. Although there was some support for this, the problem was the scale of putting it together and WAHO would have to employ extra staff to do this. There is already a Central Prefix Register based in the UK which may go worldwide.

Another suggestion had been that a sub-Committee could compile a report on the Arabian horse phenotypes. It was supported in principle but again, there was no one to do the work and this was an enormous task.

Peter Pond proposed and the Conference unanimously passed an item to make James Carine an Honorary Life Associate Member of WAHO to thank him for all his hard work. James had generously given his time and had been the Chairman of the Registries meetings and headed the Registry Advisory Sub-Committee. This was greeted with a long applause.

Following the WAHO business, Dr Tareq Abdel Raheim presented a film about *The Syrian Arabian Horse: Today and Yesterday*. It was clear that the Bedouin Arabian was the same today as it had been since the days that the Blunts and others journeyed to Syria to buy horses. Syria now has 3,000 Arabian horses registered and it was hoped that the pure Syrian Arabian horse would be preserved for the future. One member of the tour commented after seeing the Syrian horses: "What have we done to the Arabian horse?" It was very clear from this visit to Syria that the Arabian has, in some cases, been changed beyond recognition to those in the desert and questions must surely be asked.

Some final business brought forward by members was the request for money to research lavender foal syndrome as requested by Australia. A research project in America and Australia was trying to find the genetic marker for this disease, but they needed help with funding. One problem had been that people had failed to come forward with suspected cases of lavender foals probably due to stress and lack of awareness of the disease, but also due to fear of confidentiality. However, both research centres stress that absolute confidentiality would be maintained if people had suspicions of the disease and they really needed these cases to continue their work. WAHO itself could not afford to support this, but the Conference hoped that all countries would pass a request on to ask for monetary help for this research.

A full showing of the film *Children of the Wind* followed and copies of this were available to purchase.

The final talk was *The Arabian Horse in the Memories of Travellers and Western Explorers*, presented by Mr Asa'd Al Fares. This far-reaching talk recounted travellers and explorers to Syria buying horses through the years including purchasers of Arabians for France, Poland and many other countries. A special mention of the travels of Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt was the centrepiece to this fascinating talk.

The closing of the Conference was done by a representative from each Continent and generally thanks went out to Syria for the most historical Conference ever and the wonderful kindness of the citizens of Syria who were so welcoming. Basil Jadaan, the President of the Syrian Arabian Horse Association and Patron of the Conference, was thanked so much for all the input by himself and everyone. He received a standing ovation and we were so very fortunate that Basil was to accompany us on the post-Conference trips.

The final dinner was held at the Oriental Club, just a few steps from the Four Seasons Hotel and hosted by Sehr Al Sharqe Stables, Khaled Habobati. It was another eventful evening with speeches of thanks to our hosts and wonderful, colourful entertainment and a special feast was given to us.

### **Saturday 28 April**

Saturday had been set down as a sightseeing tour of Damascus and visiting the outlying cities of Maalula and Siednaia. Some of us opted to go shopping and miss the morning part of the tour and to join it in the Damascus Souk. Maalula is a city where there are caves in the rocks where people used to live and it contained a very tight canyon, reminiscent of Petra in Jordan but without the red colour. This city contained a small church in which Aramaean Arabic, the language spoken by Jesus Christ, is still spoken. The Lord's Prayer was recited for us in this ancient tongue. Siednaia is renowned for its very beautiful and famous monastery on top of the mountains.

Despite the pace of the trip, Saturday evening's dinner and Arabian horse parade, which took place at the Basil Alassad Equestrian and Shooting Club and was hosted by some private breeders in Damascus, was a wonderful finale. An enormous marquee had been set up with live band and singers to entertain us with a parade of some of the horses owned by different breeders. Here, Al Kheer Stables, Al Jadaan Stables, Naji Al Shawi Stables, Al Jamel Stables, Al Demashqyh Farm, Al Saour Farm, Al Hersh Stables, Al Kharat Stables, Reeh Blodan Stables, Al Moujahed Stables, Al Kalai Stables and Al Saleh Stables had brought between one and three horses each to parade before us.

The horses were very impressive from these studs, but I have noted that Sahab, a chestnut stallion of the Kehailen Nawagi strain, was an outstanding mover together with the stallion Jawher Adeb of the same strain. The stallions Medya (Kehailen Hyfi strain) and Samher (Seglawieh Jedrani strain) also stood out for their movement. A wonderful ending to this parade was for the mares and foals to be turned loose in an area just next to where we were seated and we were able to wander around the horses and talk to them. A stunning fleabitten mare whom many of us wanted to pack in our cases was much admired as was her lovely foal at foot. This was a special treat and demonstrated that there is so much support for the Syrian Arabians.

The WAHO Conferences are very special, bringing together people from all the countries of the world irrespective of culture, religion and politics. It is not a political organisation, but it is about the Arabian horse with all its passion and beauty and is where people meet to enjoy seeing places that they might otherwise never go. This in itself is a very important reason to hold these Conferences as the horse is so often forgotten. Thank you Syria and most of all, thank you to the Arabian horse.

☒ Read the final part of Caroline's story in the next issue of The Arabian Magazine which sees her and others venture off into the desert and follow in the footsteps of Lady Anne Blunt.