

## Hungarian Horse History trip - without leaving the United States

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In 2016 a group of friends headed on a road trip to learn some important history about the Hungarian bred Shagya-Arabian horses, driving out with horses in tow to Nebraska. I'm sure you're wondering how Nebraska has anything to do with horses bred in Hungary, it sounds like quite a stretch, but it's an important piece of history for our Shagya-Arabian horses in the United States.

Let's start with the origins of the Shagya-Arabian at the Babolna Stud in Hungary. The Babolna Stud website leads off with the statement that Hungary is a true cavalry nation and their world class stud was founded in 1789 as the Royal Babolna Stud because of the increasing demand for high-quality soldier horses. They aspired to have quality horses as their foundation. These horses were (and still are) bred for all the things a soldier desires: toughness, courage, endurance and rideability and that made them highly desirable and legendary among European horsemen. The horses bred in Hungary were instrumental in the expansion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



*Photo of a Hussar Painting at the Babolna State Stud in Hungary.*



*Photo of Hungarian Hussar Reenactment from Shagya-isg.com*

Horses were an important part of warfare and while European studs had perfected their art over the years the United States government didn't get involved in a program to provide horses to soldiers until the Civil War when the union army determined to provide horses for cavalry units. This attempt was short lived and it wasn't until 1908 when the remount service was officially activated and started a determined attempt to produce

quality horses for the cavalry. This was a difficult task given the broad geographic area and a limited number of quality horses.

In a book “War Horse” by Roberts and Livingston, we find out how the U.S. Remount Service, from 1908 to 1948, met its goals of supplying hundreds of thousands of outstanding horses for military use. The U.S. Remount Service established a special program to make government stallions available to private mare owners so they could develop a breeding pool of horses that could be called into action at any given time.

Not only was this program highly successful in serving the needs of the military, the authors point out, it had far-reaching benefits to the U.S. economy and the horse industry as we know it today. From 1914 to 1918 alone, according to Roberts and Livingston, the Army purchased more than a half million horses at a cost of about \$150 each, pumping an estimated \$82.5 million into the agricultural economy. One of the major remount stations in the United States was at Fort Robinson Nebraska, tucked away in the far northwest corner of the state. Here the horses had ample pastures, a variety of terrain to run on and were bred and trained for their cavalry jobs. At one-point Ft Robinson was the country’s largest remount station and between 1920 and 1931, the Fort Robinson remount depot issued 9,758 horses and mules.



*Tenth Cavalry practice charge at Ft Robinson courtesy of HistoryNebraska*

By the time World War II broke out, the horse was no longer as important in military operations. Mechanized vehicles had taken over most of the battlefield work, but the horses were still used in reconnaissance missions and other roles and were still considered valuable. Mules became especially important for mountain expeditions.

During WWII several of the State Studs throughout Europe were trying to save their valuable herds of horses. Stories of long treks moving animals hundreds of miles in war torn conditions are common in numerous European breeds of horses and livestock. You may have heard of Operation Cowboy or read

the book “The Perfect Horse” both of which talk about the US Army saving the Lipizzaner stallions. Another related book you may have read is “And Miles to Go,” the story of the Arabian Stallion Witez II. When Col Fred Hamilton selected horses as spoils of war from Germany and occupied territories in August of 1945, not only were Witez II and the famous Lippizan horses saved but also horses influential to the future breeding of Remount horses in the US. In this collection there were purebred Arabians, Hungarian Kisber Felver and Hungarian Shagya-Arabian horses.

It's hard to find good records of the exact number of Shagya horses that were imported. At that time the Shagya-Arabian was not recognized and the breed was not formally referred to as Shagya-Arabians until 1978. References to their identity throughout history include: Babolna Arabians, Magyar Arabians, Fajta Arabians, Anglo-Arabians and Araberesse. Documents refer to the Kisber horses as Half-Breds or grade TB's. It is not known if the remount initially comprehended the magnitude of the breeding program at Babolna and advanced horse husbandry in Hungary or the calibre of the horses they were importing. They did however come to know how valuable these horses were and appreciated their quality. There are military articles recognizing the superior qualities of the Shagya-Arabian horses and others brought from Hungary.

In 1949 the remount program was completely disbanded, and all the horses were sold at auction. At this point in time a Hungarian Countess, Margit Besseney, and a Nebraska Rancher, Steve Cooksley, brother of Major Leo Cooksley who was stationed at Ft Robinson, purchased these horses imported from Hungary. The Countess knew what treasures the horses were and in working with them during his time in the remount Major Cooksley had come to appreciate their versatility, strength, stamina and all the qualities the Babolna Stud bred for. Thanks to the efforts of these individuals, plus the Hungarian Countess Judit Gyurky, who imported roughly a dozen horses, many with Shagya-Arabian sire lines, there are now breed registries in the United States for Hungarian Horses and Shagya-Arabian Horses.

Research by Linda Rudolphi, registrar for PShR, documents nine Shagya-Arabian mares brought in by the remount. In addition, many of the Hungarian Kisber horses had Shagya-Arabian dam-lines. Unfortunately, the Shagya-Arabian mares were not used to establish the breed in the US. With the absence of a Shagya-Arabian stallion, most of the mares sold at auction were bred to a Remount TB stallion, Marcabala. The Countess Besseney did breed one of the Shagya-Arabian mares to the Remount imported purebred Arabian stallion \*Pilot. The resulting colt, Hungarian Bravo, became an important starting point for the Shagya-Arabian in the US.

Back to our road trip — on our trip out to Nebraska we enjoyed staying at Ft Robinson. While there we lodged in buildings that were replicas of officer's quarters and kept our horses in the main horse barn at the park. In our band of horses we had 4 Hungarian Shagya-Arabians, 1 Hungarian Sportlo and 2 Hungarian Felters. The Sportlo and Felver had bloodlines related to horses coming through Ft Robinson. We took in the sights during a jeep ride, walking tours of the park and the museums that included the veterinary hospital where the horses were taken care of during their stay and the blacksmith's shop and harness maker.



*Photos Clockwise: Officers Quarters and Lodging, Our Group at the Main Lodge, Veterinary Hospital*



While there, we rode every day, twice a day, for a week and experienced the terrain and trails. We can honestly tell you that while some of the trails would be great flat open spaces for conditioning, there are some trails that felt like they were straight up a vertical or those right on the edge of a bluff where one wrong step would send a horse and rider on quite a downward slide. The horses and mules who trained here were ready for anything! Ask us sometime for the GPS of the Sheep Fence Trail climb!



It was a trip worth taking, to get a feel for the circumstances that lead to our prized horses entering the United States and the value that has been placed on them for a long time. We would highly recommend taking a trip to any of the US Remount stations and learning about the history of the program and the horses that were part of it.



*Our Group at the main horse barn where we lodged our horses*

## **References Used and Some Further Reading:**

### **Shagya-Arabian Horse History**

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<http://performanceshagyaregistry.org/what-is-a-shagya.html>

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### **US Remount**

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<https://equusmagazine.com/horse-world/remount52703>

### **Fort Robinson**

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### **Further Book Reading**

<https://www.amazon.com/Heavenly-Horses-Virginia-Weisel-Johnson/dp/0878422080>

<https://www.amazon.com/Strike-Long-Trot-Horsewoman-Tellington-Jones/dp/0988521210>

<https://www.amazon.com/Miles-Go-Biography-Great-Arabian/dp/0316800317>

<https://www.amazon.com/Perfect-Horse-Priceless-Stallions-Kidnapped/dp/0345544803>

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