



Mr. Omar Sakr

# A BREEDER AND A VISIONARY

By Khaled Assem



Ameera Sakr-Egyptian Junior National Champion Mare

Mr. Omar Sakr, one of the most prominent Egyptian Arabian Horse Breeders worldwide, is the President of the Egyptian Arabian Horse Breeders Association and has been for the past 4 years. He is known to be responsible for the renaissance that Egypt is witnessing in the breeding of Straight Egyptian Arabian Horses. All the breeders are now emulating his actions, considered revolutionary and controversial at the time. Mr. Sakr, in a span of 15 years, was able to re-energize the industry and claim for Egypt a rightful place in the world arena. Horse Times has asked Mr. Sakr to share with us his journey with the Egyptian Arabian.

**H**T: It is a known fact that your decision to import Egyptian Arabians from the US and Europe has been a bold and controversial step. It stirred up different emotions and set off various reactions. What were you thinking and what did you hope to accomplish when 15 years ago, you imported the first group of horses from America? In hindsight do you consider the mission accomplished and as the President of the Breeders Association how do you deal with this controversy?

**Mr. Sakr:** Before I get into why and what I did it is important to share with you some of the history behind this horse. When you understand how this horse developed and you get to appreciate the effort that went into his development over the centuries you will realise that there is nothing controversial or novel in what I did. There was no controversy. The fact is, those who opposed what I did, did so to serve their own agendas. All that they achieved was to delay the progress until they could catch up. The Arabian horse shares its history of antiquity with no land more than Egypt. Tomb paintings and hieroglyphic

inscriptions reveal Egyptians with their desert horses as early as 1580 BC. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Egypt witnessed the most notable importation of desert-bred Arabians. It all started, in 1815, when Mohamed Ali the Great, Viceroy of Egypt and his son Ibrahim Pasha, following their conquests in Nejd, captured and brought back to Egypt hundreds of the choicest mares and stallions, representing the best bloodlines in the desert. This influx of horses was to establish Egypt until this day as the Mecca for the breeding of the purebred Arabian horse.

Mohamed Ali's grandson, Abbas Pasha the first, who ascended to power in 1848, took the breeding of Arabian horses to new heights. As a connoisseur of rare distinction, he decided early on to acquire at any price the purest and best Arabian stock available in the desert. In 1854 Abbas Pasha I met with an untimely death. His son Elhami Pasha did not share his father's passion for horses and decided in 1860 to sell his magnificent stud. The dispersal sale, said to have lasted three weeks, attracted dignitaries from all over the world. As fate would have it, a large part of the stud went to Ali



Ghazal Sakr-Egyptian National Champion Stallion



Ansata Nafisa-Egyptian National Champion Mare

Pasha Sherif. In 1897, following Ali Pasha Sherif's death, what remained of his magnificent stud (some 80 mares and 30 stallions), was auctioned off. Mr. Wilfred Blunt and his wife Lady Anne Blunt purchased a significant number of the auctioned horses, most of which were moved to their famous Crabbet stud in England. A large number of the horses were also sold to notable breeders in Egypt namely Khedive Abbas Pasha Helmi II, Prince Kamal El Din Hussein and H.R.H Prince Mohamed Ali Tewfik. In 1914, when H.R.H Prince Kamal El Din Hussein assumed the Presidency of the Royal Agricultural Society (RAS), the decision was made to exclusively focus on breeding purebred Arabians tracing back to the horses of Abbas Pasha and Ali Pasha Sherif. It was a decision that would lay the foundation that would establish the Egyptian Arabian breed, guard its purity of blood and preserve its type and quality. Horses that met the pedigree qualifications were found only at Khedive Abbas Pasha Helmi stables in Qubba, Prince Mohamed Ali stables in Manial and Lady Anne Blunts Sheikh Obeyd stables in Ein Shams. In the same spirit of uncompromising excellence, the RAS decided to import 20 Arabians of Ali Pasha Sherif's blood from the Blunt's Crabbet Park Stud in Sussex, England.

**HT: So the RAS or as it is known today the EAO imported horses from England? And how do they justify their objection to what you have done?**

**Mr. Sakr:** My point exactly! The Egyptian Agricultural Organisation (EAO) has no justification. If it weren't for the early importations, the EAO would not have existed as we know it today. Nazeer, one of the most important stallions in the breed would not have existed. It was common practice for EAO officials to travel and scout the world for bloodlines. Anyway let me just finish with the history because the more you know the more you will realise how

futile the objections are and were! Following the importations the RAS's programme was underway. This selected group of horses formed the nucleus of what would become the largest and most influential breeding programme of Egyptian Arabians in the 20th century. In 1952 the RAS's name was changed to the Egyptian Agricultural Organisation (EAO) and the horses of the deposed King Farouk at his Inshas stud were added to the EAO breeding program. The RAS/EAO prospered and established Egypt as the world capital for the finest Arabian breeding stock.

**HT: What is an Egyptian Arabian?**

**Mr Sakr:** I am glad this question is asked because very few people understand or know how this name came into existence. In 1969, a group of American breeders established a fraternal organisation with the specific objective of preserving and perpetuating purebred Arabians of Egyptian bloodlines. They referred to those Arabians as 'Straight Egyptian Arabians'. Except for a few exclusions, they were predominantly horses tracing back to Abbas Pasha and Ali Pasha Sherif bloodlines. It was the first time that those horses were identified within such a strict definition. The Pyramid Society, as it was called, established guidelines that would guard the purity of the Egyptian Arabian blood so that posterity might reap the benefits.

**HT: As a result, the 'Straight Egyptian' definition was coined by the Americans?**

**Mr Sakr:** Absolutely. The worldwide reaction was phenomenal. Up to this point, relatively few horses had been exported from Egypt. Over the next 15 years Egypt would experience the largest exodus ever of the finest Arabian bloodlines. It is estimated that some 600-700 horses were exported all over the world. The US was to get the largest share of those exports; close to 500 horses

over a 20 year period. At the centre of this Straight Egyptian buying frenzy was the EAO. An exodus of this magnitude was bound to take its toll on Arabian horse breeding programmes in Egypt. The EAO suffered the most. Their most valuable bloodlines were depleted. Their breeding programme was and remains dire to this date. When in 1990 I decided to seek and bring some of the lost bloodlines back to Egypt I was faced with resistance from most but especially from the EAO. The move threatened to expose their ailing and failing breeding programme. It was quite sad to witness the organisation that was originally founded to safeguard this heritage go out of its way to discredit horses that traced back to their own breeding programmes. Like I said before most of the breeders except for a handful jumped on the bandwagon. Claiming to guard the purity of the horse they embarked on a smear campaign. This would go on for more than a decade. I was being crucified for reclaiming my heritage and bringing back valuable bloodlines to their homeland.

**HT: Are you saying that your aim was to bring back new bloodlines to increase the genetic pool in Egypt? Bloodlines that were missing?**

**Mr Sakr:** That is correct. The exodus mentioned earlier stripped the country of their best bloodlines. The Egyptian Horse has an extremely small genetic pool by definition. To attempt to limit it more is plain lack of knowledge. Breeding the Egyptian horse is difficult as it is when you limit the tools, you make it impossible. This is where Egypt was in the early 90's, in an impossible situation created by wrong decisions over the preceding 30 years. As far as I am concerned the people in charge of the EAO were on a path to destroy our Egyptian heritage. They still are, and unless some bold decisions are made the deteriorations will continue.

**HT: What is the situation today? Is the conflict still on?**

**Mr. Sakr:** The private breeders have risen to reclaim their heritage. The breeding programmes around the country have all been revamped. The influx of Egyptian horses from the US and Europe is at an all time high. I think most of the bloodlines lost have been regained and incorporated in the various breeding programmes. The quality of the horses bred in Egypt today is receiving world acclaim. Egypt, once considered in the late 80's and early 90's to be out of the competition is back on track. Championships are being won overseas. The renaissance is expanding. Unfortunately, the EAO, still set in their ways, are left behind. They refuse to improve their breeding programmes. Ironically the private breeders that once objected are today strong advocates and supporters.

**HT: What would you have done differently if you were in charge of the EAO?**

**Omar:** Hindsight is 20:20 but let's just for the sake of argument state that I would not have sold the machinery. What I mean is, instead of selling horses like Mourafic or his likes, I would have sold their progeny. And when Al Araby who was expected to fill in Mourafic shoes dies suddenly I would have gone out and purchased some of Mourafic's progeny. All one needs to do is respect the history of this place and learn from it. I would have encouraged the importation of Egyptian horses and made use of it. Do you know that I offered the EAO, free of charge, to use my four stallions for 3 years, 10 breedings each, and they refused? There's so much that needs to be done but you need to have a breeder in charge and not a vet. The RAS was run by a board of knowledgeable breeders and business people. I have presented Prime Minister Ebaid with a short feasibility study on how to turn around the EAO which he did not consider by any means. The same study was handed over to the EAO Chairman Mohsin Adelrazik, a

year ago. He did nothing with it and I don't think he will do anything. The fact is, unless a breeder takes charge, the EAO will go from bad to worse. And you can't do it by committee! Artists do not have a committee! You have people who know what they are doing, and you have to open your horizon a little bit. Let me give you an example; they have 300 mares, if they get 5 proven stallions from imported bloodlines, and they cover every mare, they will strike gold! Something will come up! It is a game of numbers and probabilities. If you keep in breeding, as they are doing, you will get nothing. They have 80 foals a year and they marvel when they have 2 outstanding foals. It's a disgrace. The EAO in my view is taking a back seat to the private breeder, and it will never change until it's policies change.

**HT: Where does the Egyptian Arabian Horse Breeders Association (EAHBA) fit in this whole picture?**

**Mr. Sakr:** The Association, which was established in 1987, played a pivotal role over the last 15 years in promoting and encouraging the effort to return the old bloodlines. They did that by taking a stand on the issue. Efforts by some of the breeders and the EAO to exclude the imported horses and their progeny from the Annual Championships were thwarted at the board level. This strong stand gave a chance for those horses and their progeny to be shown and admired. It inspired other breeders to improve their programmes to be able to compete. The Association also publishes a pictorial reference handbook of straight Egyptian horses in Egypt, as well hosting many seminars on breeding and judging...etc.

**HT: Is it true that you have a legal case pending against the EAO? What prompted this legal action?**

**Mr. Sakr:** When the EAO in 1993 failed to get their way and exclude the imported horses and their progeny, they decided to organise their own national show. The rules



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excluded the participation of the imported horses and their progeny up to the 2nd generation. Basically it was a Special Olympics show. The problem is the EAO is a governmental organisation and its action or decisions have a strong bearing on the market and they have to be impartial since all the breeding farms are under the supervision of the Ministry. In this case the EAO was embarking on an official smear campaign and basing their decisions on flawed scientific findings. In any event the legal action I took was to contest those show conditions. The case has not yet been settled but what it has done is put pressure on the EAO to amend their conditions. They haven't done so yet but I know they will. The sad thing is that the EAO, supposedly the guardian of the Egyptian horse, is willing to invite Russian and Polish Arabians but unwilling to embrace the progeny of their own horses.

Many at the EAO claim that I am on a crusade to destroy the organisation and that the legal case is enough proof. They couldn't be further from the truth. If I wanted to do so I wouldn't have tried time and time again to convince them to improve their breeding programme. I would not have offered my stallions. The EAO's real adversaries are from within, and breeders who find it in their interest to keep the EAO lagging behind. The fact is if the EAO regains its competitive position the mediocre breeder will stand no chance. They flood the market with below average stallions every year; stallions which would otherwise be gelded in any other respectable breeding organisation. They promote mediocrity and place obstacles for the breeders. They use their role as the registry to further their interests. There is so much that needs to be addressed and it will be in due time. Incidentally, after losing the National Championship to the EAHBA, the EAO is rethinking



Tallahsman (Imperial Madheen X bint AttAllah)

competition entry conditions and have indicated that they would be willing to allow the progeny of the imported horses. An interesting change of heart that was brought about by the legal case and the EAO's desire to take back the Nationals, and not born out of conviction.

**HT:** It is always said that if it were not for General Tibor Von Sandtner the EAO would not have had the world acclaim it enjoys. What is the truth behind this statement?

**Mr. Sakr:** No one questions that General Tibor was a great horseman; however, to attribute the EAO's glory to him is far from the truth. He ran the RAS/EAO for 10 years between 1949 and 1959. The herd that he started with, which was the result of decades of selective breeding, was exceptional. Some historians like to credit the General with the discovery of Nazeer. The fact is Nazeer was acknowledged as a great sire long before he came as evidenced by the illustration in the EAO stud book no. 1

**HT:** We talked a lot about the history and the present state of affairs, what about the art of the breeding of the Egyptian Horse? What can you tell us about that?

**Mr. Sakr:** This needs to be the subject of another interview. I will

tell you that breeding the straight Egyptian horse is extremely challenging. Dealing with an Extremely small gene pool you are expected to breed a type of horse that is athletic and well-conformed. You are dealing with numerous variables and millions of genetic combinations. How successfully you accomplish that, is what sets breeders apart. The hallmark of the Egyptian Breed is the sculpted exotic head. Coupled with a short back and a fine bone structure, a proud tail carriage and an imposing presence, the Egyptian Arabian is a picture of beauty and harmony. How you get there is the challenge. Breeding the Egyptian Arabian is a form of art.

**HT:** Thank you for your time and in conclusion, is there anything else you wish to share with us?

**Mr. Sakr:** I think we pretty much talked about everything; I just want people to realise that the Egyptian Horse is the only commodity other than the Egyptian cotton that is referred to as Egyptian. It is a heritage we need to show more respect to. When one reflects on the history of the Egyptian Arabian horse, one is fascinated at how this magnificent creature has maintained an undaunted spirit and beauty that survived the personal and political upheavals of centuries that might have spelled extinction for a lesser species. ■