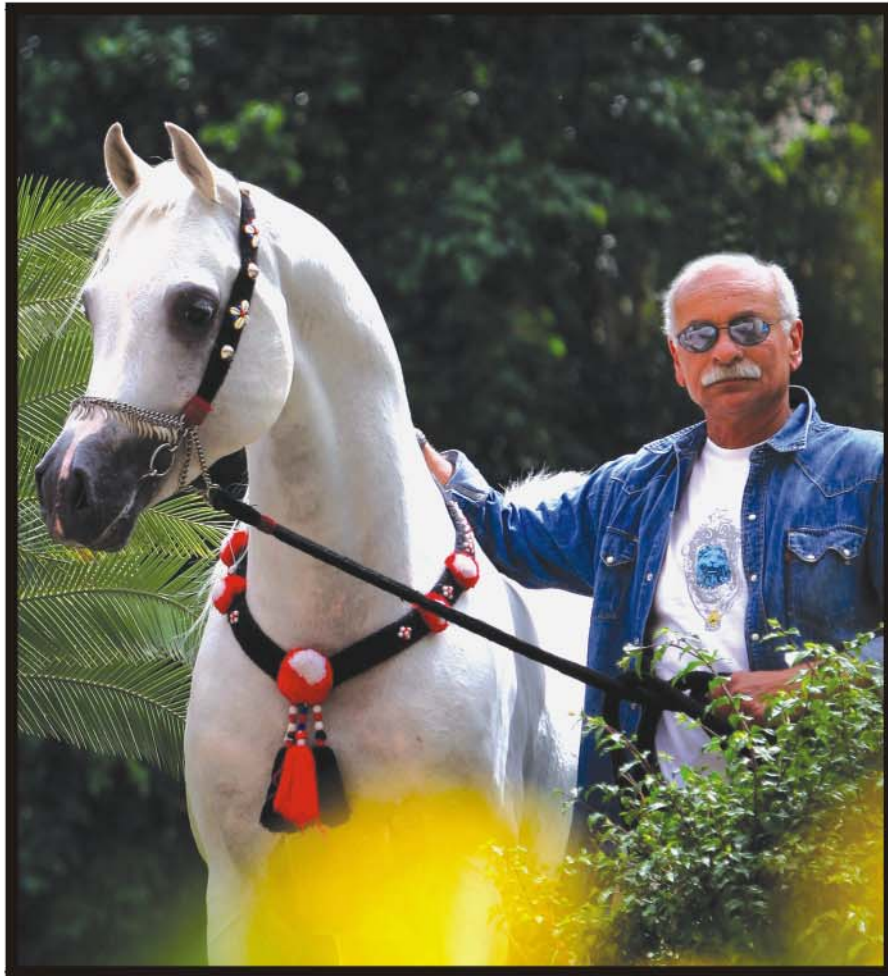




Albadeia

A Pioneer Arabian Breeder

By Khaled Assem
Photos by Dr. Nasr Mari



On a recent visit to Albadeia Stud, Khaled Assem met with Dr. Nasr Marei. They had a frank discussion about his views on the history of the Arabian horse and its position in today's world as well as Dr. Marei's thoughts on his own legacy and the future of the horse as he sees it. Dr. Marei elaborated on the international aspects of his breeding programme...

Khaled: Your late father, Sayed Marei, passed away in 1993. How was the transition?

Dr. Marei: Albadeia programme began in 1935 under my grandfather and is one of the oldest continuous breeding programmes in the world. And so horses have always been apart of my life. My father was instrumental in the beginnings of the Egyptian Agricultural Organisation (EAO) and we are the first registered farm here in Egypt. From 1990, I was involved with the managerial decisions here and took over the full responsibility with his passing.

Khaled: There is a storm of controversy about the issue of bringing horses from other countries back into Egypt. As understood, we are talking about horses of Egyptian or EAO origin. Could you elaborate on this situation?

Dr. Marei: This has been a very heated discussion for the last 15-20 years. Firstly, all the horses that were imported are 100% straight Egyptian Horses, and their origins and ancestors came from Egypt, be it farms or the EAO. The genes are definitely Egyptian unless some of the individuals were bred to non-Egyptian Arabians that were mixed such as Russian, Polish, etc. So, as long as we use the term straight Egyptian, we mean that no other bloodline was infused into these individuals at all. What impelled some breeders and I to import some horses is that the gene pool here in Egypt has become so small and we all know that inbreeding is not a good plan whether its for humans, plants, animals, or horses. Inbreeding tends to accumulate certain characteristics and most of the time they are the bad ones, though occasionally good.

Secondly, some of the breeders are not in favour of such importation due to their angle of beliefs, namely that the horses have changed, such as having an American look to them which can be true to some extent.

On the other hand, the phenotype of the horse that we see is one that, means that the genetic make-up interacts with the environment, such as feeding, accommodation to the weather pattern and the micro environment, as well as other related factors such as training and selection in breeding.

And as a consequence this interaction would constitute the individual that you see whether it's a horse or any other creature. It's true that some of the horses have deviated from what may be considered by some as the 'typical'



Simeon Sharav

Egyptian perspective or what we quote 'a classical Egyptian Arabian' but at the end of the day, it's the same genetic make-up. And I will emphasize this because many are confused between the phenotype and the genotype; the genotype is the genetic make-up of the Egyptian Arabian horse. If you give the genes responsible for the manifestation certain qualitative or quantitative characteristics in addition the proper factors and environment, these genes will fully express themselves. For instance, if the genes responsible for the size of the horse were not allowed to reach

their full potential through the provision of proper feeding and elements like minerals and vitamins during the growing phase, the horse will never grow to its full size.

Khaled: Your answer is very much appreciated, because it was never that clear. If understood correctly, there was a need to increase the gene pool and there was deficiency in some lines; as such a degree of upgrade was considered essential. And accordingly it's interesting that we should be smart enough to want to get back to that. On the other hand, does that mean that at some point in time, we have let go of some of the bloodlines that were vital to keep in the country, and were exported for some reason or another?

Dr. Marei: This is another important question. You have the source here, and if you let go of some of the individuals, your factory, so to speak, will still have the ability to provide you with similar individuals when used properly. Mourafic, Ibn Halima, Farzadak, Mareekh, Fayek or any of those legends were exported, which actually made the Egyptian horse known to the whole world moreover leading to a purpose. They acted as our ambassadors. So what the EAO did in the 50's-60's under the directorship of the late Dr. Marsafy, the consultancy of the late Dr. Amin Zaher, and my father who was at the time the Minister of Agriculture, besides being a progressive breeder, was a contemplation, that the horses that were sent to America would build up reputation, and everybody later on will come back to the source in order to get more horses. And I fully understood that because I've witnessed and talked to my father about it, as well as to those superb gentlemen that we lost. The descendants of what is being labeled as 'lost bloodlines' are still available in the EAO and in private

made and it is actually underway as we speak. Adding another point, this was during the 50's and 60's. And the breeders at that time were all hit by the socialist regime and all the important breeders were getting rid of their horses. A natural reaction...they had no money and they sold their horses or gave them away. On the other hand, the horses that went to America or to Europe were owned by very intelligent breeders that made excellent use of them. So whilst having this dip in Egypt, the quality of the Egyptian horses, in the 80's, though not the 90's, in America and Europe got much better than here.

And in the 90's, we had a spin; the quality of the Egyptian horses in Egypt improved a lot. And to prove that, we have horses from Egypt that have competed in Europe, and were champions.

Khaled: Is that a legacy that you inherited from your father too? How to have a certain vision of the perfect horse that you want to breed? How do we formulate a difference between an American breeder who plays with an incredible gene pool in America, with all the updates and knowledge, and an Egyptian breeder who has all the history and the background, maybe not as many tools, but still has quite a bit of that. How do you compete and how do you create something that wins incredible championships?

Dr. Marei: I think a breeder is an artist in a way. With the gene tool you have in hand, I think that each serious breeder tries to portray or interpret a vision of what an Arabian horse should look like. I can give you a canvas and a brush, provided that you can paint, but everybody will draw a different Arabian horse. The talented or successful breeders have to be artists. They should have a feeling for the sense of beauty, balance, agility, and movement which composes a good horse. Some people are fixed on certain characteristics of an Arabian horse. Lets say, the head; beautiful big eyes, big forehead, small head, small ears, big nostrils, and big

jaws, which is really the description/quality of the perfect Arabian horse. But many breeders are really fixed on the head, completely forgetting the body and other elements that make a good horse. The horse is not a head, the horse is a WHOLE. So if you take the horses head, and you forget the confirmation, balance, harmony or the legs, you wont have much. If you look at the way we judge horses in shows now, as in the popular European system which most of the world is using, the 20 point system, it gives 20 points for the head/neck, 20 points for the body/top line, 20 points for movements, and 20 points for the 'type' which can loosely be defined as how all the above categories fall together in order to interpret how 'ARABIAN' this horse is. Intelligent breeders have to know harmony and recognise good movement and agility. They have to have been reading a lot about horses and know what a classical horse is all about. So, comparing the Egyptian and American breeders, some of the Egyptians are very successful. It's just a matter of the availability of more tools in the hands of the American breeders at *that* time.

Khaled: You've mentioned that you have been a decision maker in this establishment for the past 15 years. Your programme has started then and is still ongoing until today with some left and right changes. Do you change with every generation?

Dr. Marei: My programme is very dynamic, I change everyday. I have to be very thankful to what my father and grandfather did, I learned a great deal from them. I was born in the midst of horses and then my father left me with about 90 horses of superior qualities and pedigree. He provided the resources and genetic pool. That made my job very easy; I had the foundation from which I could really build the

future, on top of having the opportunity to change a little bit of quality, which I actually did. In my view, I had certain problems when I took over from my father, such as in conformation, a croup that needed a little bit of modification. Then again, my horses had very good movement and beautiful heads, necks & eyes. I wanted to preserve the good qualities, and improve on the other areas, and I did. This again was by using the proper matching & selection, resorting to outside breeders, whether the EAO or privately, and by, to a limited extent, importing stallions. I imported 3 in my life, so I can improve, and I think right now I'm happy with what I did. I'm not the best at what I do, I am still improving. I just leased a horse from Qatar, Majd Al Rayan from Sheikh Abd Elaziz Bin Kaheld Al Thani, a horse whose grandsire was bred in Germany, his dam was bred in America, and he was born in Doha. It shows you how small the world is, we are exchanging stallions for the breeding seasons. I can be open to change almost everyday. When 'change' occurs, it should mean 'improving', and I do this without significantly affecting the characteristics of 'Albadeia' type. The stagnant breeder in my view is not a good breeder. One who sits on his big chair and simply says I have the best horses will never improve. Once you are critical of yourself and your horse, then you shall improve. ■



Farid Albadeia