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The pictures were taken in the Hunting Residence of Counts Castiglioni of 1230
Photo shoot art director: Mateusz Jaworski

Iron Elegance

Irina Stigler, ECAHO A judge and breeder. Born in Moscow, she now resides in Italy on Lake Como, where she created a charming hideaway in which both people and animals feel good, especially Arabian horses originating mainly from Polish and Russian lines.

RUSSIA: DISCIPLINE AND EDUCATION

Before she found her unique place on Earth, she tackled a long and difficult road all the way from Russia. When asked how would a film about her begin, she stops to think for awhile. „It can be a scene in black and white as I had a difficult childhood“ – she answers. “My parents were scientists. My education was strict as half of my family comes from Germany. My father was German – even his name Stigler indicates it – and from my mother side, my great-grandfather was also German, his name was Koch.

My father came to Russia to teach philosophy at the university. So I have international roots, mainly German blood. I had a broad education when I was a child, I started going to school a year and a half earlier than my schoolmates as I was considered talented by my parents. They made me study many things, among them languages – obviously Russian as my mother language, Italian, English – and music. Everybody in my family played the piano so I was supposed to play it too. I began

learning it when I was three. I was practicing regularly until thirteen. It was very hard for me because I was a very lively child and to be sitting at the piano six, eight hours when I was ten, was a challenge. Other children called me: Irina, come to play with us outside and I was not allowed to. I had to practice many hours a day. And they were checking my progress at the end“. Used to hard work and discipline, Irina did not stop at just studying humanities. She was also into sports, though her family was not fond of such activity. „My father did not allow me to do any kind of sports as I was playing the piano. He was always telling me: take care of your hands. You can be a very good concert pianist. But a little bit later I started fencing. I had to hide myself with this passion in the beginning but as I was a very dynamic person, I liked it a lot. I started working out in a sport club when I was nine. When I was fifteen I was a junior champion of the USSR. But I could not get acceptance from my family. Even now my mother cannot understand how I can be close to horses, clean them, ride them – she thinks it’s something dirty“.

photo: home archive



photo: home archive



photo: home archive



ITALY: A NEW BEGINNING

Arabian horse appeared in her life right after departing from Russia. But first she studied psychology and linguistics at the Moscow University. As a 23 year old Irina receives a chance that she decides to take a bet on. „I was working as an interpreter at exhibitions, just to earn some money because my family could not help me a lot” – she says. “Just after I graduated from the University I got a phone call from Clementoni, the widely famous games for children producer. He invited me to come to Italy where they were organizing a joint-venture company to collaborate with Russia. I was very young, no commitments, so I said ok, let's see what happens.

So I arrived in Italy, in Milan, with no family, no friends. That was a difficult time. People working in the office were much older than me, everything was very expensive, I could not afford almost anything. But I admit it was a fruitful experience.

I also worked in a sport club teaching children fencing and participated with them in several competitions. I even took part in the All Nations Cup, in Como, against Margherita Zalafi, a very famous foilist, multiple World and Olympic champion and I was losing only by one point! After six years of no training. That was a big achievement for me”.

Though she does not have it easy – no friends, loneliness, communication problems – as the spoken language, when you move to a foreign country, is not the same as the one that we learn at the university – poor finances, as she was sending the money she earned to her family in Moscow during hard time for Russians immediately after Perestroika, it is at that moment that Arabians appear in her life. „I went to Verona to the European Arabian Championship and I saw the Arabian horse – **Piruet**. I knew immediately what kind of horses I would like to have in the future – she recalls. “I think it's all about taste and elegance. It's a kind of family heritage – the beauty was important for my parents, they were very good looking, they dressed elegantly.

And my grandfather was breeding horses, so it might be that this passion came to me with the genes”. And so with

her very first larger paycheck Irina buys a horse. "It was an Arabian stallion. The first horse and first Arabian in my life. Everybody was against me, telling me that I was crazy as the horse had a really hot blood, he was kicking and behaving very badly. He already changed five or six owners, even though he was only three. But we became friends and I rode him very successfully. We competed in some endurance races together with good results. His name is **Idet** and I still own him. He is 22 now and he still is my favorite horse. When I have some spare time, I put a saddle on him and I go riding, just alone. Some walk, some trot, just for pleasure. I can think, I can plan, I trust him totally".

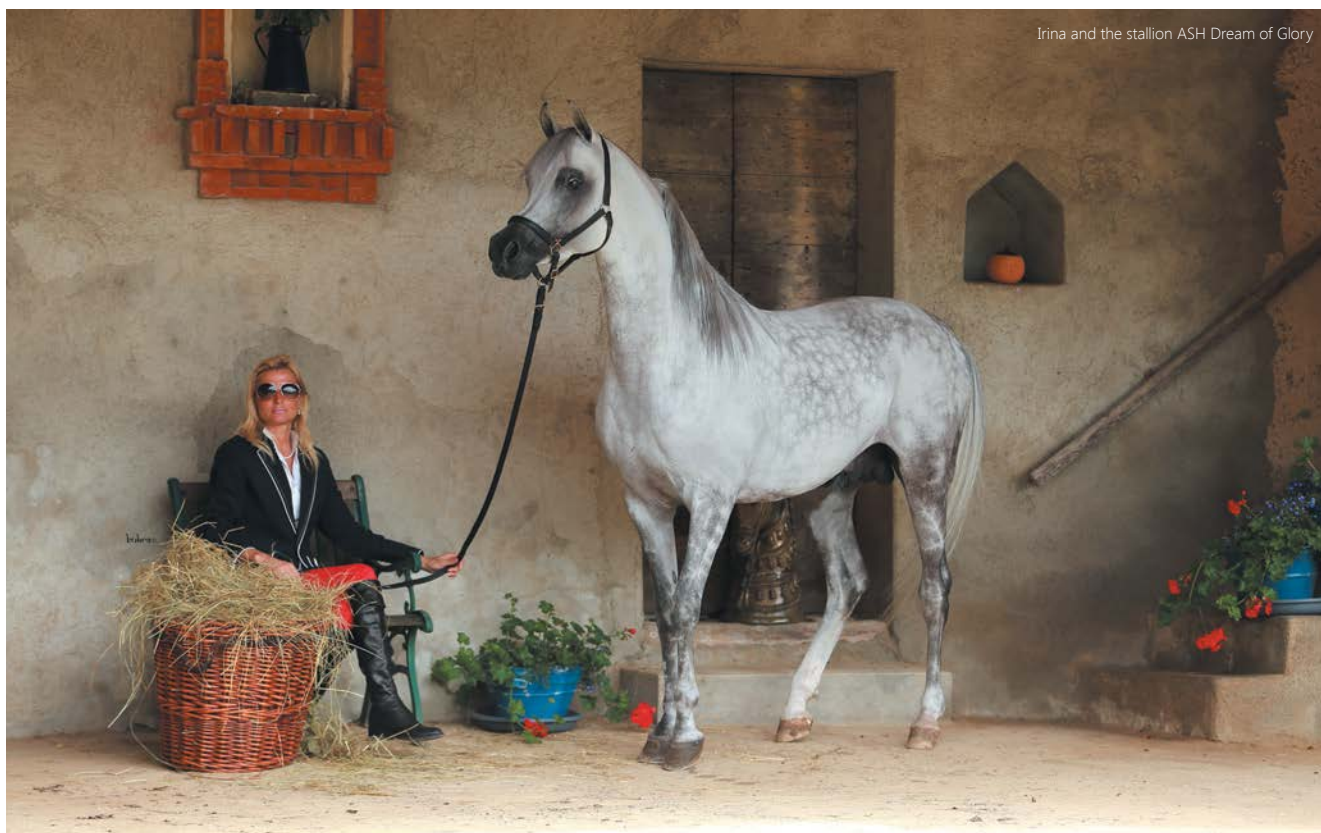
BREEDER AND JUDGE: LIVING OUT OF A SUITCASE

It didn't end on one horse and endurance races in the mountains. Irina decided to set up a breeding farm. „When you are studying psychology you also have some medical courses. So I studied genetics, I liked it a lot and was good at it" – she explains. "If I had not gotten into Arabian horses, I would probably choose some genetic development – I am a doctor in the end.

I enjoy also dogs, I like them because of their elegance and intelligence, but I am not able to be into everything, so I don't breed them. King poodles are very clever, they are considered to be the most clever breed. Sometimes I let somebody show them, the chestnut one is a father of World Champions, but I don't follow it much". Horse shows are something different. Here Irina participates as either judge or breeder. When she acts as the latter, it's sometimes hard for her to keep calm. "I am very nervous like any other competitor. Every breeder wants to win". She achieved a big success recently as her stallion **ASH Dream of Glory** (WH Justice – Donna Diva/Ekstern) became Gold Senior Champion Stallion at the Italian Nationals in Citta di Castello (12.09.2014).

Is judging a pleasure or hard work? According to Irina – both. „A judge should also be a teacher, a person who is able to give the right direction to the breeder. He should see correctness mixed with beauty. For sure it is a pleasure too as it means traveling, meeting people, new





Irina and the stallion ASH Dream of Glory

friendships, great hospitality. It's a big family". However the frequent travels are a challenge. Irina is always on the road, living out of suitcases, always in a hurry. "I have three suitcases always prepared, open in one room" – she reveals. "Winter, summer and the middle of the season. Sometimes I change something inside, buy something new. I am lucky because I can see beautiful horses so close, I can study the pedigrees and decide what to do and what not to do. Traveling is a very good experience, a very good lesson, because breeding is endless".

A place where she will always eagerly return to is Syria. "Great culture, great hospitality, good food, open minded people, still simple, which I prefer. Nicely dressed, with good taste. And the desert – I love Palmira. I feel the great space, great size, something big. I can imagine horses and camels walking across. The breeders there are very different, high level, low level – we can find everything for every taste. I am waiting to be able to go back there. My name Irina is a Greek name which means "Peace". I wait for the peace in Syria".

Despite her love for the desert the key moment for Irina as a breeder was a trip to the US and meeting the stallion **Padrons Psyche**. She visited him in his stable after the show in Las Vegas. He made a huge impression on her. "He is the stallion of the century" – she says with a deep conviction. She also admits to being a lover of the chestnut coat color. "In the famous „Kniga ob arabskoj łoszadi" by Szczerbатов and Stroganov, published for the first time in 1900 in Sankt Petersburg, I read that chestnut horses are better movers than the greys and bays. So I am happy because I have several chestnut horses. And they move like hell!"

RUSSIA: THE TRADITION

Though she lives outside of her homeland, she is a Russian patriot. "I am strongly connected to my home country, I travel there often, my country gave me education and prepared me for my life abroad". Irina also pays close attention to Russian breeding – she is a co-organizer of the Russian National Championships.

“The Russian Tersk Stud and other breeders were very famous in the past and big amount of money was paid for Russian horses. After many years of stagnation the breeding program was suffering a lot and the horses were receiving poor treatment. But I think that now people like Igor Bochkarev are investing money and time in development. Next year we would like to organize a big international event, probably in Sankt Petersburg to give more vision to Russian breeders. Russian people like to read, they remember the history, they look back and into the future. The tradition is a living tradition, it's not dead at all. I am personally helping Russian breeders to return to the international arena, for example by offering breedings, as many of them cannot afford the fashionable stallions. In some years they will be very competitive. Education needs time but some day the market will be much more open”.

At her stud Irina has horses mostly with Polish and Russian blood. “I have a lot of Polish-Russian blood, mostly Russian, 75%. Russian horses are descendants of Polish horses – as we know, Polish horses have been taken during the war – but then different stallions were used in both countries. So they are similar to a certain point. Egyptian blood gives a lot of refinement but at the end of the day I think the winning combination is not pure breeding, but some kind of mix. You are very limited if you work only with pure breeding. And I am looking for a correct horse, strong movement and a beautiful eye”. Some say that it is not possible to breed a horse that would be both correct and blessed with a beautiful, exotic head. But Irina thinks that it's worth to try. „I am looking for a combination of good legs and beautiful head. Is it possible? It's hard but we have to try. Fashion is changing, people are realizing that bodies and legs are difficult to repair. It's difficult but it's an everybody's dream. Nothing is impossible. If we say “it's impossible” we have to give up. So it comes slowly, but a clever breeder can achieve it if he is lucky. He can have a dream horse”.

She emphasizes, that for her the best time in the year is when the foals are born. “I really wait for the new foals.

I can evaluate the result of my decisions, the weak points, the strong points. Of course nobody can know how they will develop. But for sure you can see immediately the quality. It's difficult to explain how, it's a kind of talent – to see it or not to see it. You just catch a glance and you are able to predict a little bit if it's a future champion or not” – she explains.

SADDLE AND MOUNTAINS: MOMENTS TO HERSELF

Horses are not the only professional activity of Irina. Not many people know that she is still active as a psychologist, runs a pet store and rides horses regularly. “I am most familiar with dogs, then with horses. The only time when my mind is completely clear, when I can think and do the planning is when I ride my horse in the park. I am happy when I put on the saddle – a big military saddle – and go alone with my horse. It is a special collaboration between two beings – me and him. He has to understand me, I have to understand him. And we are close to nature – which is important too”.

Many frequent show observers associates Irina as being the most elegant judge. She always turns heads with original attire, excellent accessories and attention to detail. “Probably it's coming from my father” – she smiles. “He was always very well dressed, playing piano or organs, giving concerts. And I like to be different – I am an anti conformist with everything, also with clothes. So it's probably genetic. I hear sometimes “Oh, you are the most elegant judge we have ever seen. Where do you buy your clothes?” Living in Italy helps for sure – we have many elegant shops here. The funny thing is that Lenita Perroy pictured me as a Polish Queen!”.

Irina can allow herself to feel satisfied. She is professionally fulfilled, knows how to make her dreams come true and she may very well be in the best time of her life right now. “I would repeat everything I did in my life” – she sums up. “The only thing is maybe the quality of the people – would be nice to repeat it with higher level people that are not playing behind your back. But even hard times can open new doors for your future life”. 🐾