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Highlights from the feature story

On the racecourse at Corbeanca, near Bucharest, the show is attended only by the sportsmen, the horses' owners and some relatives. The horses are born and bred in Romania and are worth thousands of euros abroad. Unfortunately the project of creating a competitive national breed is an almost suicidal financial undertaking. Florin Codre is one of the few Romanian investors who, in his farm in Bucovina, passionately dedicates his time and money to his dream of ameliorating the Romanian Sport Horse, a breed still open. But a lot of time is needed as well as avoiding the temptation of immediate earning.

The majority of the thoroughbred horses in the country are raised in state-owned stud farms. In 2002, the National Forest Administration took over the management of the stud farms, all in pitiful conditions. At Jegalia stud farm, the Classification Commission evaluates the horses following outdated criteria, such as height and other figures, while the international practice replaced them with more relevant ratios between proportions. In spite of the state's intervention, Jegalia stud farm is an extremely non profitable business. The market dramatically dropped at the end of 2005 and out of the total of 280 horses, 180 can hardly be fed.

After the adoption of the horse law, the National Horse Authority has been created with the role of evaluating thoroughbred horses, from both the National Forest Administration's stud farms as well as from private owners. The mares and studs capable to pass on the superlative qualities of the pure bred are taken by the National Stud Farm which receives the money allowance to feed them.

The horse legislation, initiated by Attila Kelemen, is considered to be an opportunity for the private owners who became more numerous in the last few years. In order to become a stud farm owner, one needs five mares and a stud.

Tiberiu Hermenean, a vet, is the president of the Association of Lipizzaner Breeders, founded in 2000. It numbers 40 breeders and more than 300 horses and it is very active, organizing competitions and training sessions with foreign instructors. The Romanian racing carts held the eighth place in the world cup, the best result in the equine sport in tens of years. In spite of present economical pressure, Tiberiu Hermenean is convinced that one can live off horses if one could afford to wait for a while.

The horse legislation is less clear regarding the working horses, which represent 95% of the national number. The law compels the farmers to breed their working horses only with authorized specimens in order to purify the blood and obtain better horses. The fines reach 5000 RON (1400 €) but nobody really knows who is going to apply the law. Under a different name, the law existed in the past too, but it was never applied because the mount studs which should have freshened the blood of the common horses were in insufficient numbers.

There are farmers, in Straja for example, a village renowned for its horses, who have a traditional know-how in breeding their horses and are not even aware that there is a horse

legislation. For them, even if they are good horse breeders and own an excellent genetic material, the law will only bring pungent fines.

Full text about ILPH

“Old, ill nags... this is not the best recommendation for the Romanian villages which have to undertake the European leap. With the veterinarian chapter as a neuralgic point regarding the EU admission, the rural Romania presents itself under informed and underdeveloped. This affects the horse as well – that’s what the ILPH (International League for the Protection of Horses) concluded after two years of field research. The British charity found few cases of cruelty or deliberate abuse against animals, nevertheless much poverty and ignorance.

The ignorance has historical causes: the communism had persecuted the horse owners and sent the animals to the CAP (communist agricultural units) stables where they belonged to nobody. Riding, the sport of the army officers, as well as farriery and saddlery, deteriorated and almost disappeared. Breeding is still undertaken in some areas where the traditions were kept and were not degraded by the forced communist agriculture and where the secrets of horse breeding were transmitted from father to son, like in Straja.

With these facts in mind, I went to the launch of the ILPH project – one million pounds for the welfare of Romanian horses. The entire parade of the horse people, in festive apparel, made me wonder for a second whether “Project Romania” was not yet another of those spending machines, with colorful brochures, pompous words and insufficient content. My apprehensions disappeared entirely the next day, when I met the ILPH team gathered around a table in a two star hotel. With turned up sleeves and dark rings around the eyes, the six British horse lovers were beaming with the success of their efforts: not the social one a night before, but that from the training sessions and that from the practical course in which the vets kept asking many questions. ILPH opted for a pragmatic support: for five years, one million pounds will cover the expenses for organizing training courses for vets, farriers and saddlers. The best graduates from the first series become trainers for the following. “The horses are not badly treated, but there is no know-how anymore – Ian Kelly explains, a strong-looking Scottish, former supervisor at the royal stables of Buckingham Palace. The problem is that after the EU admission, tourism will explode and tourists will look for areas which preserved their traditions, where nature is still unaltered. If they see ill-treated animals, there will be a loss of image for Romania.” The education efforts of ILPH also include the representatives of different veterinary authorities which, under the pressure of Romania’s accession, fully supported the project. The courses will not leave out the problem of the infectious equine anemia. In parallel with the official eradication campaign, consisting in sacrificing the contaminated animals (which, in the first phase of the disease, can be slaughtered for consumption), the ILPH trainers will refer to the methods of avoiding the contamination by the vets themselves. “Being an infectious disease similar to AIDS, the infectious equine anemia is transmitted by insects, sexually, but equally through the needles with which the vets test the animals once a year. It is compulsory that disposable needles and sterilized instruments be used, which doesn’t happen very often in rural areas” - says Vasile Virgolici, veterinary and collaborator of ILPH. There seems to be a long way until abusive or wrong practices will change but Haydn Price, expert of the British Equine Federation, master in the art of farriery and a philosopher is an optimist: “The reactions were extraordinarily enthusiast. The horse industry in Romania is in an embryony state, but it will surely explode. Sometimes, people don’t realize the riches they hold in their hands.”

More highlights from the feature story

Some farmers begin to realize the potential of agro tourism involving horse-related services such as sleigh or cart trips. In his “Utopia” farm near Sighisoara, Mihnea Virgolici, after

many failed agricultural experiments, invested in horses and finally sees a ray of light: in the summer of 2005, he had an average of 10 tourists a day and a constant income.

At 150 km from Sighisoara, in the Fagaras mountains, Barbara and Christoph Promberger's hospitable farm represents a 500,000 \$ investment. They offer trips for expert riders, most of them from abroad. There is no market for something like this in Romania: there are few people who can ride or afford to pay. In spite of the refusal of the banks to credit such an investment because "in Romania there is no future for horses", the Prombergers' business is more than promising.

In Medias, saddlery business is flourishing: two companies make saddles, mostly for export, at very competitive prices for the European market. Although the most lucrative horse business is racing, in Romania there hasn't been any horse racing since 1960. There is one hippodrome outside Ploiesti, not functional, desperately awaiting foreign investment. The wages and the fees of those involved in the cantering racing are insignificant. Atilio D'Alessio, representative of a company owning an important network of hippodromes in Italy, came to Romania with an investment plan. In his opinion, although in Romania the racing tradition and the horse culture had been lost, everything can be built again based on the leisure culture. The betting industry will naturally follow after the development of a complex with hippodrome, terraces, restaurants, poney club for the kids.

The future of the Romanian horsemanship resides not only in its horses but also in the people dedicated to this sport. At "Felix Topescu" Sports Club, named after the former Romanian champion, there are only a few youngsters interested in this sport.

The lack of money affects the entire activity of the Romanian Equine Federation: insignificant annual budget, few clubs, lack of hippodromes. As a result, the Romanian participation in international competitions is more than unsatisfying. During the 1930, Romania used to be among the first five countries in the world.