

War, Survival, and Global Legacy: The Rebirth of the Polish Arabian Horse

By the early twentieth century, the Polish Arabian horse stood as one of the most carefully cultivated expressions of the breed anywhere in the world. Its development had not been accidental. It was the product of long stewardship, often carried within noble families whose estates served not only as centers of agriculture, but as repositories of bloodlines that reached back, in some cases, to the desert itself. These horses were valued not merely for their beauty, but for their utility, endurance, and the quiet continuity of their inheritance.

That continuity, however, proved more fragile than it appeared -- the first great rupture came with the upheavals surrounding the First World War and the political transformations that followed it. Across Eastern Europe, and particularly in regions touched by the Russian Revolution, the great estates upon which Arabian breeding depended were swept into a broader social and political collapse. These estates were tied to a socio-economic class that had become the target of the revolutionaries. In the atmosphere of the time, distinctions between land, wealth, and the living things maintained upon that land were often lost. Horses were seized, dispersed, or destroyed alongside the structures that had sustained them. Records disappeared. Lines that had been preserved across generations were broken in a matter of days.

What is striking, looking back, is not just the scale of the loss, but its indifference. The destruction was not directed at the horse itself, nor at the knowledge embedded within these breeding programs. It was part of a larger movement that did not distinguish between what could be rebuilt and what, once lost, could never be recovered.

And yet, from this first collapse, a rebuilding began in Poland. During the interwar years, efforts were made—both by private breeders and increasingly through state organization—to gather what remained and reestablish a coherent breeding program. Institutions such as Janów Podlaski assumed a central role, consolidating surviving horses and reconstituting mare families from the fragments that could still be traced. By the late 1930s, the Polish Arabian horse had regained a measure of its former strength, though it rested on a narrower foundation than before.

The second disruption came with far greater force. The outbreak of the Second World War brought with it a level of devastation from which there could be no simple recovery. Stud farms were overrun as military fronts advanced and receded across Poland. Horses were taken as spoils, transported under harsh conditions, or simply lost in the chaos. The evacuation of breeding stock westward—through winter landscapes, under pressure and uncertainty—has since taken on a near-mythic place in Arabian horse history. But for those responsible for the horses, it was not a story of heroism so much as one of necessity and risk, undertaken without any assurance that the lines they carried would survive the journey.

Many horses did not make it. Survivors were a relatively small number of surviving mare families, together with a limited group of stallions whose lines had likewise endured. Whether by circumstance or by deliberate intervention, these remnants—supplemented in part by horses later recovered or reintroduced—gradually formed the post-war breeding program. It is from this narrowed and carefully managed foundation, representing both the maternal and paternal sides, that the modern Polish Arabian horse descends.

What followed in the decades after 1945 was remarkable. Under state management, and with a renewed emphasis on careful selection, the Polish program did not merely stabilize; it gained

international recognition. Horses bred in Poland began to appear in programs across Europe, in North America, and eventually throughout the world. Their influence can now be traced across continents, shaping breeding decisions far removed from where the surviving horses once grazed.

Although Polish Arabian bloodlines are now found throughout the world, that success rests on a relatively small foundation. The same mare families that survived the disruptions well over one hundred years ago still underpin the breed today, along with a limited number of sire lines. Their influence has spread widely, but the number of original lines has not increased.

Understanding this makes clear that the survival of the Polish Arabian horse was not guaranteed. It depended on the recovery of a small number of horses and the deliberate effort to rebuild from them. Breeders worked with what remained, often under difficult conditions, making practical decisions to preserve as much of the original structure as possible.

For that reason, the Polish Arabian horse should be seen not only as the result of careful breeding, but also as the outcome of survival. The population that exists today reflects both the lines that endured and those that were lost along the way.

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