

History of the Puli

By S. E. Szeremy

To understand a breed, it helps to know where it came from and about the circumstances and people who shaped it.

For many years, accepted wisdom - according to various books on the breed - had it that the Puli may have dated back some 5500 years to the Sumerians, later migrating with the Avars (thought to be proto-Magyarok) as they crossed through the higher altitudes of India and Asia; But there is also a growing school of thought that the Puli was a dog associated with a people called the Cuman, a turkic speaking people who originated in Western China near Tibet. Fleeing the Mongols, the Cuman began migrating from Asia in 900 A.D. and brought with them a little dog that was possibly a relative to the Puli today. Those who judge non-sporting breeds might have already noticed a remarkable resemblance between the Puli and the Tibetan terrier. It is possible that they share a similar root stock with the little herding dog that migrated with the Cumans.

Though the Puli's overall structure is similar to the Tibetan terrier, the Puli's corded coat developed as a result of environment. Looks and performance could not be divided: Having migrated through areas of intense weather, the dog now worked on the open plains of the Hungarian Pusztas, and developed a corded coat which not only protected against the brutal winter frost, but also against summer heat. This corded coat, while an efficient insulator, best served the Puli by not restricting his very elastic movement - critical to the Puli's success as a sheepdog.

The Cuman settled in Hungary in the mid 13th century. They were granted refuge by the Hungarian king, but when the Cuman King was killed by Hungarian soldiers who were afraid that the Cumans were Mongol spies, the Cumans fled south. This southern journey by the Cumans gives rise to speculation about the origin of a dog now found in this area: the corded Bergamasco, which in appearance is somewhere between a Puli and a Komondor. The Cumans were later recalled by the Hungarian monarchy in 1246 and settled in central Hungary where they intermarried with the Magyars.

Hungarians are survivors - they've had to be in light of the frequency with which Hungary was invaded. Each invasion brought destruction and wreaked havoc with both man and animal. The Turkish invasion during the 1500's saw Hungarian breeds of cattle, sheep and sheepdogs stolen and herded south toward Turkey. Later, during the occupation by the Austrians, everything Hungarian in origin was forbidden. These up-and-down periods resulted in treasures being lost along with documentation that might have helped later generations more thoroughly research the heritage of the Hungarian people and that of the Puli.

The 1800's, were good to the Puli. The Hungarian shepherd paid attention to proportions, size and color of a good herding Puli, having learned from the horsemen of the pusztas what structural aspects of conformation resulted in dogs of endurance and speed.

The late 1800's gave us the first more or less technical description of the Puli that was referred to in a book written in 1924 by Dr. Raitsits. This 19th century passage referred to the Puli's size and it read: "The Puli used around sheep is always lower than the highest point of the shepherd's boots."

The Shepherds protected their dogs the best way they knew how: They showed discretion in protecting a bitch in season, they took time to arrange for the best matings and sometimes spent days riding to distant parts of the country to breed a Puli bitch to the best male. And why not? In those days, the price of a GOOD Puli was just about equal to the earnings of a shepherd for a full year.

The Puli was expected to learn to herd sheep by watching older, experienced Pulis working - and while the Hungarian shepherd was proud of his reliable, hard working helper, he thought nothing of getting rid of the dog if he failed to live up to the job at hand. It was this almost ruthless culling that has enabled the breed to retain, to this day, the quick intelligence, speed, and turn-on-a-dime agility for which the Puli is noted - those qualities which make the Puli "more than just a dog" to the Hungarian shepherd.

The early 1900's began a period of organized breeding in Hungary. Natural sciences began to give a lead in breeding Hungarian sheep dogs, but it was Dr. Emil Raitsits, a professor at the Hungarian University of Veterinary Medicine, who began a program to reconstitute the Puli, fearing it would become extinct from fast modernization of agriculture.

He enlisted the help of Adolf Lendl, the director of the Budapest Zoo, and together, they allocated small funds to remodel a part of the zoo for an experimental breeding program and exhibit. The program expanded, acquired a kennel name (Allatkert) and furnished the foundation stock for many Hungarian kennels.

In an effort to popularize the breed, the standard was somewhat looser than today: sixty years ago, the Hungarian stud book recorded standards for the following classes: the Police Puli (19" plus), the Working or medium Puli (19.7 - 15.7"), the small Puli (15.7 - 11.8") and the dwarf, miniature or Toy Puli (11" and under). A point system rewarded the medium and small Pulis with maximum available points for size impression, since it was these sizes which reflected the ancient requirements of Hungarian shepherds. In time it became apparent that the breed was not going to become popular enough anytime soon to warrant such a large number of varieties.

By this point, the Puli had become popularized to where it became a point of pride for a Hungarian to own a Puli, Komondor, or any other Hungarian breed, and interest in the breed had expanded to the United States.

As part of an experiment, the U.S. Department of Agriculture imported four purebred Pulis in 1935 in Beltsville, Maryland when trying to help American agriculturists concerned with the problem of herding dogs that sometimes killed the very animals they had been entrusted to protect. The Pulis were bred among themselves and crossed with the GSD, the Chow Chow and perhaps with two Turkish sheepdogs which were quartered there at the time. Where "dogs" such as other herding breeds, scored in the range of 12 to 14 on the tests given by researchers there, Pulik scored, on the average, between 75 and 85. Tests were inconclusive and never published, and when WWII broke out, the Pulis were auctioned off to professional breeders and it is thought that it is from these four dogs and their progeny that the beginning of recorded history of the Puli in the United States begins.

In Hungary, WWII proved devastating to the breed. Food was scarce, medicine and insecticides unavailable and kennels had to give up priceless breeding stock. Many Puli owners had to place their dogs with non-doggie friends and Pulis left behind were killed by bombs or shot by Germans or Russians seeking to silence the protective and barking Pulik. Thousands of Pulik were lost and had the breed not reached heights of popularity prior to the war, the breed could very easily have been wiped out during this period of conflict.

By 1955, the Puli breed population had grown and in 1959, the Hungarian Puli club decided to create a Puli standard that would not have to be adjusted with constant changes in popularity. The toy and police sized Pulik were eliminated and remaining sizes were included within one category. By the 1960s, the breed reached pre-war numbers.

The last 40 years have seen the AKC acceptance of Hungarian pedigrees, new recognized bloodlines, two updated standards, and importation of the breed from other countries where refugees and émigrés settled years ago. In the last ten years, the breed has become very global indeed, and close ties have been formed between Puli breeders in Great Britain, Australia, Germany, Belgium and, of course, Hungary. Importation of breeding stock and the availability of frozen semen has expanded the gene pool in all countries for the betterment of the breed.

History: Another Point of View

The Puli is the ancient sheepdog of Hungary, introduced by the migration of the Magyars from Central Asia over 1000 years ago. Records show Pulik working the plains of the Puszta as early as the 9th century. Some believe the Puli existed as a working sheepdog for thousands of years prior to this, perhaps as early as 4500 B.C.

Nomadic shepherds of the Hungarian plains valued their herding dogs, paying as much as a year's salary for a Puli. They were ruthless in maintaining working qualities and would eliminate any dogs that didn't show these qualities immediately. To survive, the Puli had to be physically sound and mentally capable, agile and willing to work. The Puli's coat protected the dog while living outdoors without amenities. He was typically sheared in the spring with the sheep, allowing the coat ample time to regrow before winter. The Puli was used both as a drover as the shepherd moved the flock over many many miles up into the plains, and as a herder for large herds of sheep (often several hundred). The shepherd would work in tandem with the Komondor, the guardian of the flock, particularly at night. The Puli was also used as a general farm dog, herding cattle and protecting the farm.

The introduction of French and German shepherding dogs into Hungary after the 1600s resulted in interbreeding, particularly with the Briard, and the production of two other Hungarian herding breeds, the Pumi and the Mudi. By the late 1800s, the terms Pumi and Puli were used almost interchangeably, although the breeds did maintain several distinct characteristics. The early 1900s saw an effort by breeders to restore and reconstitute the Puli. World War II saw the devastation of the breed in Hungary, with Nazi troopers killing many of the farm dogs during the war.

The first Pulik were imported to the US in the mid-1930's, as part of a USDA project to evaluate shepherding dogs. The Puli excelled in tests of intelligence. Today most Pulik have adapted well to home or apartment living. They retain the intelligence, ability, and willingness to work that endeared them to the shepherds of long ago, and they retain a strong herding instinct and desire to work. These herding and protective instincts are a dominant factor in its temperament. The Puli is extremely intelligent, a deeply loyal dog, wary of strangers, and often a clown for his masters, bubbling with an energy he can scarcely control at times.