

Canaan canines

The top authority on Israel's national dog, Myrna Shibolet, continues her work in Italy

By Patricia Golan



EL AL AGENTS at Ben-Gurion airport's departures terminal were a bit overwhelmed at having to process a dozen or so dogs in airline crates at once. A year and a half ago, Myrna Shibolet, the world authority on Canaan Dogs, was leaving the country on a one-way ticket for Italy. In addition to the Canaans, there were some of her champion Collies and Portuguese Podengos, tiny service dogs.

The scene was quite an attraction. As the agents were checking documents and weighing the airline crates to be loaded onto a plane bound for Milan, a large crowd gathered, peering into the crates. None of the dogs was barking; they were all show dogs and were accustomed to crates.

Shibolet and her prize dogs were leaving for Italy to set up a kennel, after losing her appeal against eviction orders from her home of 47 years in Sha'ar HaGai (near Jerusalem) initiated by the Israel Lands Authority. (See box on page 27)

The Canaan Dog, indigenous to the region and known in Hebrew as the Canaani, is Israel's official national breed. Featured on the Israel Kennel Club's logo, the dog even appears on Israeli postage stamps.

It's a breed long associated with the Beduin, who, while historically herders, don't use the breed for actual herding.

"The dogs guard, chase away predators, they notify them if strangers are coming, that's what they need a dog for. Beduin don't need herd dogs; that's the job for children and women," explains Shibolet.

Like other "primitive" breeds of dog, Canaans are athletic, square-built, medium-sized dogs. Their tails curl over their back, ears are erect and they have a double

YIGAL PARDO

Myrna Shibolet with one of her prize Canaans

Israel

coat that withstands all elements. They can be cream colored, black and all shades of brown.

“They can be trained as working dogs, to search and rescue, because they use their natural scenting abilities to find the missing person, and they love it, says Shobileth, an animal behaviorist, world-champion dog breeder and international dog show judge.

“The breed has existed for thousands of years in this part of the world, exactly as it looks today,” she says. “It’s never been something that has been selectively bred for a particular appearance or purpose. This is what nature created and there are very few of these dogs left in the world.”

In addition to the Canaan Dog of Israel, the ancient breeds that are closest to the original ancestor of the dog include the Carolina Dog, the Indian Pariah, the Dingo and the New Guinea Singing Dog.

“When you see references in the Bible to the dogs that barked or didn’t bark when the Jews left Egypt, it was this type of dog,” she says. Archeological evidence of this appears in 1st century rock carvings in the Sinai and a 2,500 year old dog cemetery in Ashkelon containing skeletons of 700 dogs that were apparently buried in ceremonies.

THE CANAAN was first identified as a proper breed in the early 1930s by Austrian chemist and animal behaviorist Professor Rudolphina Menzel during her travels in British Mandate Palestine. She and her similarly named husband Dr. Rudolph Menzel immigrated in 1938 and soon became legendary in the local dog world. The Menzels eventually would become the first to publish a proper stud book in Israel, in which pedigreed dogs could be registered in an organized fashion.

At first, they worked with the Hagana, the pre-state underground army, to develop and train dogs for military use. (The Hagana’s canine unit was the forerunner of today’s dog-handling Oketz unit in the Israel Defense Forces.) The Menzels realized that the breeds of dog most commonly used for guarding and war dog tasks suffered from the difficult local climate. They began looking for local dogs that would be more suitable for army service, and noticed the dogs hanging around Beduin Arab camps. They referred to them as “pariah” dogs – the name used in

India for the untouchable castes. They were “untouchables” because, apparently, they wouldn’t let any human being touch them.

It emerged this wasn’t true. “The Menzels discovered that the Canaans were actually domesticated and were excellent guard and rescue dogs,” states 87-year-old Esther Cohn, a retired child psychologist and veteran dog trainer. As a child in the 1930s, Cohn became an avid student of the Menzels.

“They came here in 1938 from Austria with their kennel of boxers and other trained dogs. They’d give dog training courses, and because I liked dogs and my parents didn’t very much, I began hanging out there,” she recalls.

Interviewed in her apartment in a retirement home in Haifa, Cohn recalls those early days in Kiriath Motzkin north of Haifa. “The Menzels’s little house was always the center for dog-related activities. Officers from the British army used to stop by. They were dog lovers,” she says. “They didn’t have any children, so they took me in somehow and I learned a lot from them.

During World War II, Menzel trained dogs for mine detection for the British. (Later those same dogs would be used by the British to find secret hiding places for weapons hidden by Jews.) As teenagers, Cohn and her future husband Alex edited a newspaper started by the Menzels for dog trainers. In 1948, she and Alex served in the first canine unit of the new Israeli army; she still teaches at the police canine unit. She shows visitors an old German book written by the Menzels, the first known published text about the Canaan dog.

“Unfortunately this was never translated,” she says.

What the Menzels had discovered was that this “Pariah Hunde” was a true native breed ideally adapted to local living conditions. They began a breeding program and named the dog after the biblical Land of Canaan. In 1966, the breed standard was accepted by the World Canine Organization.

“This is the original Canaan dog. These were wild dogs the Menzels took to breed,” says Cohn, pointing to the photographs in the book. “They decided that they would like to create a stable breed that would be the breed of Israel, or then, Palestine.”

Menzel, who also trained guide dogs for the blind in Israel, died in 1973.

When Shibileth immigrated to Israel from Chicago in 1969, she met Menzel, who gave her some of her first Canaan dogs. Together with the late Dr. D’vora Ben-Shaul, at the time the chief biologist for the Israel Nature Reserves Authority, Shibileth started her own breeding group. They named the Sha’ar HaGai Kennels for the rugged plot of land high above the gorge known as Sha’ar HaGai on the main highway from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Canaan Dogs, which have been used by the IDF for scenting and guard work, have keen senses that tell them when something is different or wrong. Shibileth insists that they cannot be trained to be aggressive. “With few genetic or health problems, Canaan dogs have a lifespan of 16 to 17 years.”

FOR MANY Israelis, the Canaan dog is considered the local mutt, often found abandoned. There are indeed many dogs that show physical characteristics of the breed who find their way into local animal shelters.

“Just like the United States is full of pit bulls in their animal shelters, we’re loaded with Canaan dogs in our shelters,” says Chaya Bailey, in charge of the intake of dogs and cats at Jerusalem’s privately funded SPCA animal shelter.

Like many involved in rescuing and re-homing dogs, Bailey strongly disapproves of dog breeders.

“My whole problem about any kind of breeding is that millions and millions of dogs are killed all over the world because there are just many more dogs than people want,” says an exasperated Bailey. “When people take a Canaan dog, which is basically a working dog and try to make it into a family pet it’s very difficult. They’re very intelligent, very independent and they also have a lot of hair. They’re not really meant for families. They’re not really pets, and difficult to raise – especially in an apartment. So people take them when they’re puppies and then dump them when they’re older. It’s really a shame.”

That may be true, says Shibileth, but, she maintains, most of these dogs are not true Canaans. “I’m telling you all these dogs they call Canaans are not Canaans. A dog has to look like a Canaan, with the phenotypical characteristics of a Canaan.”

She insists the Canaan is a great family dog, but with a very specific personality.

“If you don’t expect it to behave like a Labrador retriever, a Canaan is very loyal and devoted to its people. A Canaan is not an aggressive dog. He warns; he doesn’t attack. But he is independent, and you have to have a partnership with him.”

From the beginning, Shibolet and Ben-Shaul managed to keep the breed’s genetic base broad by bringing dogs from nature into her breeding program.

“We try very hard to keep them natural, not to change them, and one of the ways we do this is to bring dogs from the Beduin or free-living dogs to add to the population. It’s becoming very hard to find them because they’re disappearing.”

This has meant going to increasingly remote locations to find pure specimens. Over the years Shibolet and Ben-Shaul cultivated relationships with Beduin herders in the Negev desert in the south who used Canaan dogs with their flocks.

“Beduin don’t breed dogs, they use males to guard, but they know where the females are. The children and women can usually approach the dogs, but the men consider dogs beneath their dignity.”

One of Shibolet’s favorite stories is about the time she went to a Beduin encampment in the Negev to get a particular male she’d spotted on a previous visit the family had promised to catch for her. After the requisite polite formalities over sweet tea and coffee, she finally asked where the dog was.

“The dog was tied up to a tractor 200 meters away, looking very unhappy,” she relates. “We took our crate out of the car, but how to get him into it. The men won’t have anything to do with dogs, so we’re standing there looking at the dog, and the dog is looking at them, and no one is happy about the situation. Suddenly one of the women comes along, sees what’s going on, grabs the dog’s chain, and pulls him into the crate. That was that.”

Today, after decades of careful management in building up the foundation population, the Canaan is acknowledged everywhere as a purebred, pedigreed dog, recognized by all kennel clubs in the world. Because there was no other place in the country where she could maintain her kennel once the eviction was final, Shibolet moved to a friend’s house in Toscana Italy. So Israel’s national dog, the first dog that became partner to man, is now learning Italian. Shibolet plans to come back to Israel to continue her searches for new desert dogs and still work for the preservation of the breed wherever it is in the world now.

Myrna Shibolet’s book, “The Israel Canaan Dog Book,” has recently been reissued. Information on it is available at myrnash@netvision.net.il, or the publisher eytan@hendelmade.com ■

THE STORY BEHIND THE EVICTION

In 1970, together with D’vora Ben-Shaul, other friends and their dogs, Myrna Shibolet moved into long abandoned buildings built by the British during the time of the mandate following World War I. The beige stone buildings originally housed the workers and engineers who ran the nearby water pumping station (a red British post box is still on the site.)

“When we moved in the buildings were in a state of total ruin, the ceilings collapsed, and everything was full of sheep droppings from the Beduin who had passed through and camped over the years,” Myrna recalls.

They slowly renovated the houses and cleaned up the property, building fences and kennels. They spent the first several months without water and 17 years without electricity. The group signed a lease with Mekorot (the national water company) believing it was the owner of the property.

In 1980, Mekorot refused to extend the lease and told the residents they had to vacate the property. In subsequent court hearings it turned out that the Israel Land Authority (ILA) and not Mekorot, was the actual owner of the land.

According to Shibolet, they asked repeatedly for a lease so they could stay on legally over the next 30 years, but never got a response, despite paying local property taxes. When the ILA finally decided to evict the residents in 2011, the Sha’ar HaGai Kennels became the focal point of a four-year legal battle. Despite the kennel’s longtime existence on the site, a statement from the ILA stressed that “the land is owned by the State of Israel.”

“These are trespassers who took over state lands and six historical buildings in Sha’ar Hagai, a national park in which residences were prohibited,” the ILA’s unusually harsh statement read. “This is a criminal offense punishable by up to two years in prison.”

During the legal proceedings Myrna and her famous kennels became a cause célèbre, both in Israel and internationally, for people concerned about the contin-

uation of the Canaan breed. An on-line petition protesting the eviction garnered 40,000 signatures, but in the end Myrna and the other residents lost their case and subsequent appeal against the eviction. The ILA refused to pay any compensation.

Last summer, the ILA razed the modest house Shibolet had lived in for four and a half decades. In order to prevent anyone else from entering the buildings, once everyone is evicted, the ILA intends to raze all the structures on the site, even though some have been designated formally as historic buildings. (The Jerusalem branch of the Council for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in Israel is looking into the matter.) Bizarrely, the highway planning division recently built a new turnoff to the site and erected official signs.

Sha’ar HaGai is not alone. In recent years the ILA has launched a country-wide campaign to evict people living on state lands, regardless of the circumstances or investments of the residents. In many cases, precise ownership and legal status of the property is muddled, but the residents inevitably lose their appeal.

“There’s no such thing as having formal rights to live in a place that’s been designated state land,” admits attorney Yaacov Amster, a real estate lawyer who represented Shibolet. “She lost because she didn’t have rights. It’s true that for years they tried to obtain legal status and were ignored, but if you pitch a tent in a field and sit there for 10 years, it’s still not going to be your property.”

Asked if he’d take on a similar case were he approached, Amster replied, “Yes, just to drive them crazy, because I believe in justice in these situations. It would have been so simple to come to these people and say, ‘you’ve lived here for many years, you’ve invested in developing the land, you have a strong connection, you’re not bothering anyone, let’s establish a legal status,’” continues Amster. “It’s just cruelty, people with a narrow outlook, a stupid state that can’t see the benefits.”

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