

Major George Iwanowski

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The history of the Lipizzaner horses in South Africa is so closely linked to the life and times of one person. Major George Iwanowski, a Polish immigrant, single-handedly launched the tradition of the performing white stallions in South Africa.

Iwanowski was born on his family estate, Lebiódka, in Eastern Poland. He graduated from the Warsaw Agricultural College and wrote his diploma papers on horse breeding to obtain a Master of Science degree. He spent two years as assistant director of the Polish National Stud, Bogostawice, whereafter he completed cavalry school and joined the 1st Lancers Regiment.

Then the Second World War broke out and he had to fight for his country. After the war, Major Iwanowski was commissioned by the Polish army to take over the SS stud Lauenburg, in the Rhineland. He spent two years at the stud when politics again interfered. Poland had been “sold” to the Russians and would become a communist state, subservient to Moscow. In a desperate move to escape the nightmare that was sure to follow, Iwanowski packed his bags and moved to South Africa.

On his arrival in Johannesburg, he set out to meet horsey people who could be instrumental in helping him find employment. It worked and after an initial stint at a stud farm in the Karoo, he returned to Johannesburg where he and Josy Hicks formed a

partnership and started Centaur Stables, which later became the first home of the Lipizzaner team.

The Major met Count Jankovich-Besan who invited him to his stud at Mooirivier and offered him his first Lipizzaner stallion, Maestoso Erdem. Due to the natural trainability of the Lipizzaner, Erdem was soon performing some of the more difficult dressage movements and impressing at shows all over the country in both competition and displays.

It is interesting to note that Iwanowski was not only a dyed-in-the-wool dressage rider, but also jumped and competed in horse racing at the same time. Many steeplechase riders later become top dressage riders, but seldom, if ever, had one rider managed to win a dressage championship and a hurdle championship in the same year - something the Major managed!

Building the team

Following the success of the displays put on by Erdem, the Major began to build a performing Lipizzaner team. These were all stallions who belonged to other riders, pupils of the Major, but who performed together as a team. It was at about this time that the Major met Colonel Hans Handler, at the time the second in command at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, in Rhodesia, who gave him his first lessons in High School riding and accepted an invitation to visit his school in Johannesburg.

His input into putting together the still rather informal displays – both in organising and choreography, was invaluable. This gave the Major the idea of forming a permanent Lipizzaner team for public displays.

In 1962 tragedy struck when Erdem broke his leg. They managed to save the horse though, but his performing days were over. He was retired to stud, but sadly sired only two foals before dying of a mysterious illness. The Major did not appear on a Lipizzaner in public for almost two years.

Fate intervened. Count Jankovich-Besan's stud was in financial trouble and the horses needed to be sold or find their way to the butcher. Angela Irvin and her husband Jack, the managing director of National Chemical Products, bought some of the horses and move them from the stud at Mooi River to the NCP farm at Waterkloof, also in Natal.

Major Iwanowski was set with the task of finding homes for the other horses. He proposed to the Irvins that all their young colts be sent to his school for training and that they form a team known as the NCP Lipizzaner team to publicise the company's products, which included horse feed. This was the first step towards realising the Major's dream of having his own team of dancing white stallions – an ambitious feat as not even in England had a Lipizzaner team been formed.

The training of the young stallions progressed. The public flocked to the performances in droves. The shows became more and more spectacular with the riders donning the formal attire and some of the elaborate period dress of past centuries. Side-saddle displays captured the elegance of days gone by and is unique to the SA Lipizzaner show, as in Vienna they only have male riders.

Apart from the Major, all the other riders were women. Some of the original riders in the team were Mietie von Hartesveldt, Margie Widman, Ann Sutton, Lynn Jarmen, Gill Meyer, Anne Webb, Ania Glintenkamp, Eva Sydow, Carol Kretschmar, Maureen Quinn, Helen Dagliesh and Valerie Welsh.

Going from strength to strength, the team's efforts were rewarded when they were invited by Colonel Handler to visit the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. This proved to them that they were on the right track and that the Lipizzaners in South Africa were here to stay.

Major Iwanowski celebrated his 100th birthday earlier this year (2007) and the SA Lipizzaners proudly put on a special performance in his honour, with many of the people and riders that were originally involved. As he now lives in Poland, he was unable to attend, but a video of this event was sent to him as a special tribute from the team in SA.