

WARNING: PARTS OF THIS ARTICLE MIGHT BE DISTURBING TO SOME READERS - seriously...

This is the second part of the three-part article I started posting last week.

“The Working Dog”

By MIKLOS LETAY “A KUTYA” issues - 1970

This article is an excerpt from the dissertation of MIKLOS LETAY, who graduated from the Department of Ethnography of ELTE (EOTVOS LORANT Science University). His dissertation advisor was Professor ISTVAN TALASI

PART 2

Every shepherd protected and cared for his dog, especially if he was valuable working animal. Envious people, angry neighbors or thieves, often tried to hurt even kill dogs with poison, embedding sharp objects, such as needles and nails in meat or in bread mixed with baking soda and giving the poisoned and harmful baits to dogs.

In the Bakony region, (the largest Trans-Danubian mountain range in the western part of Hungary, north of Lake Balaton), pig wranglers often engaged in cruel sadistic rituals of throwing old frail retired or captured stray dogs in boar pens where the raging ferocious hogs tore the frightened vulnerable animals to pieces. It was a widespread myth that these unspeakable savage acts of aggression, feeding dogs to hogs build herd instinct in the swines and they don't wonder off from their herd.

In the countryside it was also a frequent practice that dogs that got sick or those that injured or killed poultry and other small livestock, stole eggs, their owners simply killed them by clubbing them to death, shot them or hung them in the name of damage control.

In the same time, on the opposite end of the spectrum when other dog handlers replaced their old working dogs with a younger one, they kept the retired ones in the relative comfort of the farm.

In general, dogs were kept and fed poorly in Hungary in the past. It was a long held tradition among shepherds, to feed their working dogs with limited food in order to keep them motivated to work and to “avoid laziness.” Herding and guardian dogs occupied the top spot of the farm dog hierarchy. Herding dogs were fed small portions from the shepherds own food that was freshly cooked in dutch ovens out on the fields. They weren't fed meat due to the belief that the flesh of raw meat makes the dogs more aggressive and might hurt or kill the livestock during herding. The guardian dogs, Komondorok and Kuvaszok, on the other hand, while they were also under fed, were kept on protein rich overwhelmingly meat diet based on the idea that raw meat makes them more aggressive, therefore they protect better from predators. Naturally, meat protein also made the guardian dogs, stronger and larger. The meat source were usually local gypsies who sold the ranchers and shepherds cheap frail weak old horses. When out on the fields, they stored the meat by hanging the cuts from trees or on butchering wheels (a spoked cart wheel secured horizontally to the top of a post.)

Watchdogs living on farms were fed with substandard, hog slop quality feed, such as table scrap, fruit and vegetable peels bread crust, frequently moldy. They also consumed the unused offal such as the butchered animals' guts. The watch dogs on the farm often supplemented their diet by eating the dead uncollected chicken carcasses from the poultry yard. They also fed themselves with the deposed carcasses of larger livestock in the barn yard. (*To avoid time consuming pit digging for dead animals to bury them underground, it has been a common practice on farms to cover animal carcasses with manure piles to accelerate the decomposition of the dead animals*- translator's note.)

Herding and guardian dogs out on the fields also supplemented their rather short diets. They consumed the remains of unburied dead livestock that died on the fields of injury or disease. (Carcasses were cordoned off with barb wires to keep predators such as wolves, Golden

Jackals or stray dogs out. The working dogs had to crawl under the wires to feed on the dead often decaying animal remains -* translator's note...)

These practices were mostly used at remote, isolated farms and distant grazing camps, where health inspections were nonexistent or sporadic the most. In the same time, shepherds paid special attention to the care of clean drinking waters from their wells.

It was customary that when managers of larger farms or estates hired shepherds, the negotiated wage and in-kind supplements also included the feeding cost and care of the shepherds' dogs.

Archival records from Püspökladány, 1794, shows the negotiated in kind earning as part of the shepherds' total wage that included four loaves of bread per week as partial support to the feeding of the shepherd's dogs.

No one paid too much attention to the dogs' shelters to provide protection and some limited comfort against the elements. On the farms, dogs tried to stay along the side of the buildings, preferably where they were protected from exposure to the wind and rain, they stayed on the porch if they were allowed, dug holes under straw piles or under abandoned dilapidated building structures. Dogs preferred the most to rest inside barns and service buildings where they might could rest in open boxes with some rugs in them.

Around the 1900s people started building dog houses from scrap wood and other used building materials. These dog houses usually were put under large trees or the back of buildings sometimes in some depression in the landscape to protect the dog house from the wind.

Pastoral dogs in the grazing camps were exposed to the elements much more than their farm watch dog counterparts. They usually stayed under the open sky resting among the livestock, or on some straw, perhaps on an old blanket at the feet of the Shepherd. Some camps had temporary run-in sheds for the purpose of protecting the live stock from direct rain and wind. The dogs often stayed in there during inclement weather. The ground in these buildings was often wet from rain water mixed with livestock urine and manure. (Run-in sheds are three-wall, open front livestock buildings with roof. They don't have built in floors or prepared ground under them.* - translator notes)

In Slovakia and Transylvania, mobile dog shelters were often available for working and farm watch dogs.