

Les Benis

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Several fanciers have asked me for my thoughts on the Puli color debate raging in Europe.

I suspect that many younger Puli owners do not know, or remember me. Before leveling this coming harsh criticism on some foreign Puli people of foreign lands, let me introduce myself. My name is Les Benis. I was born in Hungary. I am not a scientist, or a genetic expert. My claim to fame is, that I stayed alive long enough to see, hear, and remember the many dozens of theories and old wives tails regarding Puli history and coat color. I grew up around Pulis, my parents had Pulis before I was born. I bred, nurtured, trained, exhibited and observed several dozen Puli litters. I started to judge Pulis almost 45 years ago, which included the honor of judging twice at Westminster. I always looked up to those breeders who maintained the quality, size, and working ability the shepherds required from their Pulis. The shepherds developed the Puli for their specific need, hundreds of years ago. I have serious disagreement with those who say; since Pulis are not herding anymore we can change them any way we want. I immensely dislike the influence of fashion trends in any breed, especially in Puli. Antiquity in a breed is normally considered an asset.

Delighted that through the years, with some others, I managed to rescue (import) some Pulis from Hungary, that later became famous. In my opinion, at that time fresh blood was very badly needed in the US. Pulis like; World Show Winner, 3X Specialty Winner Int. Ch. Cinkotai Csibesz; 2X Specialty Winner, Int. Ch. Gyalpusztai Kocos Burkus; 2X Specialty Winner Ch. Belzebub Gezenguz; almost a dozen Sasvolgyi Hunnia Champions, plus 25 or more. These imported Pulis were all rusty black, black, or gray. None of them had a single missing tooth! (Today missing teeth are becoming common.) These Pulis formed a strong base in the USA. All this happened before the multi-color craze started in Europe.

Early modern day, written records (1751 Heppe, and 1773 Der Schaferhund, Der Hirtenhund, by Buffon) and many others, indicated the Puli color was always a sun-beaten rusty black, or black, or gray. Probably none of these were colors the way we picture them today. Most of them were faded, sun beaten. The shepherds certainly did not use hair enhancements to make their Pulis darker, more brilliant. Before WW1 there were serious attempts made to save and try to popularize the ancient Hungarian dog, cattle and sheep breeds. The early dog show records nowhere show colors other than

rusty black, black and gray!

Various agricultural, nature and hunting publications, some on an academic level, wrote about, analyzed, and dissected the Puli in the last two hundred years. There is no real scientific, or historical evidence to show us that the Pulis originally existed in light and multi colors.

In my part of the world, and in some others, we still have large farms, open ranges with real live cowboys, carrying Colt 45s, walking next to their herding dogs. Very much like they did hundreds of years ago in the Hortobagy (Hungarian) prairie. In all of my years I have not seen or heard one cream, apricot, blond (Fako) or multi-colored Puli that did herding for a living. There must be a reason!

The Hungarian Kennel Club (MEOE) was formed in 1899. The first Hungarian dog magazine, *Dog Breeding*, was published in 1930. The name of the magazine changed several times.

After years of inner fighting the Hungarian Herding Breeds, (Dr. Raitsits, and President) separated itself from the Hungarian Kennel Club in 1924. Raitsits started his own, new, separate registry. His pioneering work should be adored by generations, but in order to inflate the registration numbers, Pulis were registered in four size categories. Somewhat later, more than likely for the same reason, different colors started to show up on his registrations . For example; “---light colored luxus Puli---”.

In one issue of the Dog Breeders magazine a Baroness was happy to report that she managed to breed white Pulis. (MAN MADE PULI COLOR NUMBER 1) The accompanied photograph in the magazine showed several, miniaturized, coarse, heavy boned komondorlike Pulis. Interestingly, very shortly after the first Baroness, another one reported success of breeding (establishing) white Pulis, in an entirely different region of Hungary. This second set of Pulis all looked like overgrown white Maltese. (MAN MADE PULI COLOR NUMBER 2) Anyone interested can look up old Hungarian dog magazines in the Hungarian National Library, (Szecsenyi Konyvtar), Budapest.

As late as 1960s there was still clear evidence of the two entirely different white Puli coat textures. Through the years transportation of dogs became easier in Hungary. Quite a few years ago I judged Pulis in Hungary and we were waiting for the next class to come in. A longtime friend was judging another breed in the next ring. When he saw my disappointment at the

quality of the white Pulis coming in ring, he leaned across the divider, put his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear; do not worry, they (the white Pulis) are just for the American tourists.

These two different white coats were interbred with good black Pulis. The best known cynological experts helped the early breeders. As a result, today we have some excellent white Pulis such as those observed at the October 2003 Puli Club of America National Specialty. In some countries the whites are not supposed to be bred to any other color, the gene pool is constantly diminishing. The whole world suspects that in order to bring in fresh blood, occasionally black Pulis were, (or are) bred to whites. It is relatively easy to keep the white Pulis separate from the other colors. What happens when too many pedigrees become unreliable? I do not think the Puli gene pool can afford another long time color experiment.

It is very simple, for any breeder, to introduce additional new color variations, or variations in structural features. Normally we call these breeders' mistakes. The cream, apricot, blond, (light bread color) (Fako in Hungarian) Pulis surfaced again in the late 1960s. They started to show them in local shows in 1973 (MAN MADE PULI COLOR NUMBER 3). I would venture to say that originally, somewhere a (sexually) overactive mutt was more responsible for today's apricots than any scientific experiments. Same goes for the multi-colored Pulis. A cream colored dog with a dark face mask?! (Maszkos Fako, in Hungarian). (MAN MADE PULI COLOR NUMBER 4) We cannot call it a solid colored breed anymore the way it has been known for centuries! It is bad enough that Fako, even in Hungarian, is an unqualified, "undetermined" color, but the new FCI/Hungarian standard requires a "definite black mask around the face". The official translation of fako is "faded". No description is given that faded from what color, to what color! By the way, multi-colored Pulis were disqualified from the days of beginning of history, until the latest Hungarian standard change in 2002. The fact is that the blond color and their quality has been unstable for many years now. If they were in the original gene pool of the Puli why did they only became good enough to be acceptable by FCI in 2002?

Throughout the years the Puli color controversy flared up and died down. Up to 1924 the shepherds had Pulis only in the three original colors. From 1924 to 1945 it appeared as those all colors of the rainbow were accepted. In 1962 the three original colors plus white was published in the Hungarian judge's guide. In 1977 a very light cream color was favored by the Sarkany/Ocsag book. In 2002 the light solid cream was phased out . On

the various shades of beige, cream, a BLACK MASK became MANDATORY! Do the Hungarians want the Puli world to believe they know what they are doing or want? Oh the political pressures! Around 1963 I visited Dr Ocsag to learn how much he can tell us about the Puli and its history. We knew that he was the darling of the communist system, so we had to tread carefully. The very first question he had for us: how much can you sell your Pulis for in the US? It was interesting to me that this was the most important concern for him? When the question of the Puli color came up he got almost irritated when we mentioned that we believe and are only interested in the original colors. According to him, it would be very advantageous for monetary reasons if the Hungarian government owned export-import company could produce Pulis in various colors. This reminds of the song in Cabaret ...“Money, money, money makes the world go around...”

Because there was constant bickering between Puli breeders, exhibitors and dog show judges, the Hungarian National Standardization Office, (over and above the Hungarian Kennel Club,) issued a 29 page booklet. “How to judge a Puli.” (A Magyar Puli Kulemi Biralata.) Publication number: MSZ 6811-61. Approved in December 1,1961 and mandatory effective October 1, 1962. Under colors: solid black, rusty black, gray and white listed ONLY. I just learned very recently that this publication officially has never been annulled. I would like to know how the Hungarian Kennel Club is going to explain this to FCI?

During the dark years of communism it became fashionable to rewrite Hungarian history. In 1977 Dr. Pal Sarkany and Dr. Imre Ocsag published the book; Dogs of Hungary. Pal Sarkany was the product of a “theory of communism” school in Russia. Through his political connections he became first the president of the Hungarian Kennel Club (MEOE) and for one year the International Kennel Club (FCI). He never owned a dog in his adult life! Sarkany and his wife visited Los Angeles, USA. I personally set up a meeting for him with a couple of USA dog magazine writers. Minutes before the first meeting Sarkany asked me; just in case, someone should ask, how many days is a bitch pregnant? I must have been visibly shaken. The president of the FCI and president of the HKC does not know? Minutes later we tried to find out details about FCI. For example what does it take to obtain an International Championship. He had no idea! When I raised my brows in disgust he said; “I am an executive not a worker bee. I do not have to know!” And, these were the two most influential people to start the multi-color, free for all, breeding craze, and possibly the ruination of our beloved breed! I am glad that in most of the western world, national

politics or politicians do not influence dog breeding.

In several countries, breeders who were, or are unable to breed consistently, first class, original color, working quality Pulis, got on the bandwagon. Unusual colors sell well for a while.

Today's slogan is; ... this day and age, only a very small percentage (if any) of the Pulis are used for herding, today's breeders have the RIGHT to change the Puli, every way they see fit... There are (mostly British) breeds that have not been substantially changed in more than a hundred years. We might see modernizing the English dog vocabulary, but not the basic requirements. Beside short term monetary gain I do not know any earthly reason to regularly change the Puli standard. Whether we believe that our breed is hundreds or thousands of years old, we have an obligation to the breed. In the past 20-25 years some breeders were cross breeding the correct Pulis to the blond and multi-colored masked blonds, thereby dangerously thinning down the gene pool. The communist and post-communist, money hungry era created an atmosphere where some breeders are willing to sell out the past history and future of the Puli. Clever Puli website advertising today even has the nerve to claim that the original color of the Puli could have been the blond! Generations of shepherds with their trusty Pulis must be spinning in their graves.

So the question was raised, where are we going from here, what can be done? Fortunately, the multi-colored issue, has not hit in the US, yet. Unless a substantial number of breeders, first in Hungary, and around the world, will be able to concentrate on keeping the original Puli pure, the outcome could be disastrous.

The Pulis have come back from almost total extinction a couple times in history. I hope they will be able to shake off the bad influence of the current, color/multi-color fashion craze.

**LB
May 2004**



Black Masked Fako Pulis – pictures from Puli Club of Hungary website, April 2004





PCA Specialty 1964
Picture from *A PULI* by Dr. Ocsag, 1962 p.147