

# ABYSSINIANS IN THE NETHERLANDS

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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

The history of the Abyssinian in The Netherlands began in 1937, when Mrs L Kreunen-Mees imported a Usual female from England; she had seen Selesdune Buntibou at the Kensington Kitten Show in London, and bought her straight away. On 28th November, 1937 Buntibou was shown in Rotterdam, as the very first Abyssinian shown in The Netherlands, and was Best in Show - not a bad start for Abys. She subsequently had two litters, with all Usual kittens. The first litter was sired by Woodrooffe Zeus, who was owned by Mme. Guyot in Paris, and the second by her own son Pele van d'Arke Noachs. As elsewhere in Europe, Abyssinian breeding suffered from a tremendous setback during the War, and so unfortunately there are no modern descendants from this line.

The foundation for the modern Abyssinian here was laid by Mrs Maria Falkena-Rohle, who still breeds under the MARIENDAAL prefix. Mrs Falkena breeds not only Abys but also Siamese and Orientals. Additionally, she has had a fair number of wild cats, among them Margays and Oncillas. In 1961, she imported the Usual female, Taishun Cleoni, while Dr. Jebbink imported Nigella Simba, a Usual male; Cleoni was bred by Edith Menezes and Simba by Flo Bone, in the United Kingdom. Subsequently she imported from Germany a cat of rare beauty, Assunta von Daschan, and a Sorrel pair from the U.K.; Tranby Red Sothis and Tranby Dalila, bred by Dorothy Windsor. Later she imported two Usuals from the U.S.: Wole-Rabe's Orchid (male) and G(Len)n's Daphne (female).

Mrs Falkena has done a lot for the Abyssinian, not only in The Netherlands, but also elsewhere; there are thus no European Abys without Mariendaal ancestors other than those imported during the past five or so years. Mariendaal Abyssinians have gone to Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Germany, France and Belgium and also to Australia ( Lotos van Mariendaal ) and the U.S. ( two Usuals and eight Sorrels ). Thus even in the United States a large number of Abys have Mariendaal ancestors. With this background, I visited Mrs Falkena recently and recorded the following interview.

## MRS FALKENA-ROHLE INTERVIEWED

HOW DID YOU FIRST COME IN CONTACT WITH ABYSSINIANS ?

Around 1959 a friend who knew we loved cats suggested we should go to a cat show. So off I went with my husband and children to a show in Rotterdam. There were longhairs on one side and Siamese on the other, but in between there was a cat who drew my attention because he was so unusual. That turned out to be an Aby, Snorrehus James, owned by Mrs Helga Dietze ( Memphis ) from Germany. I have always had a weakness for wild cats, and



I just could not get away from his cage, being fascinated by the sheer beauty of this cat who looked just like a miniature lion. I kept talking about him all the way home to Arnhem, and six months later I was still talking about him.

One day my husband finally said, "If you are so crazy about an Abyssinian, why don't you buy one?". Well, I went up to the attic to get Mrs Dietze's address from the show catalogue, took my passport and handbag, told my husband I'd be away for a few days, hopped into my little car, and drove off to Hamelin where Mrs Dietze lived, some 300 km. away. Unannounced, I pressed the door-bell and when she opened the door, I told her I had come from Holland and wanted to buy an Abyssinian. She almost cried with laughter: her kittens were fully booked for the next three years! However, she did give me a list of English Aby breeders.

After unsuccessfully trying to buy an Abyssinian at a huge pet shop while on holiday in Switzerland - of course, they hadn't even heard of Abyssinians - my next step was to buy a book which had a description of the Abyssinian. I then wrote to England to Mrs Dorothy Winsor (Tranby), whose name was on Mrs Dietze's list, quoting to her the standard I had found in the book, and asking for an Aby who looked just like that. In her reply, Mrs Winsor said, "Dear Mrs Falkena, I'm afraid you are looking for the impossible cat!" She had no Usuals at the time, only Sorrels, but mentioned that Mrs Menezes (Taishun) had a litter of Usuals. From Mrs Menezes I bought my first, Taishun Cleoni, a Usual female who was a beautiful Aby apart from a white spot on her chest.

In the meantime, I had been keeping in contact with Mrs Dietze, and when I visited her again after a year, I saw on the sofa an Aby I hadn't seen before - to my astonishment, I was looking at "the impossible cat": Assunta von Ras-Daschan. Moreover, she was a daughter of Snorrehus James. When we both went to Scheveningen later that year, Assunta was Best in Show, beating my Cleoni, among others. Mrs Dietze had of course noticed how much I admired Assunta and in May 1962 she phoned me to say that she had to give up Aby breeding, and I could have Assunta for 500 German marks, an enormous amount in those days. I discussed it with my husband, whose reaction was that if I didn't get her, there would be no peace in the house. That's how I bought Assunta.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE STANDARD OF ABYS TODAY, COMPARED TO THOSE OF TWENTY YEARS AGO AND WHAT ARE THE MAJOR DIFFERENCES?

Type has deteriorated and colour has been improved. Furthermore, I think we've lost correct ear set and, to a certain extent, length of head; this is probably due to cats with very good colour but less type. I also made concessions for the sake of colour, not that I wanted it so badly - with due respect to the warm colour we have today, I was perfectly happy with those sand-coloured Abys who had a light orange undercoat. But today it is impossible to get a CAC (Challenge) for an Aby who is outstanding in type but has less colour, while it is certainly possible to get one for an Aby with excellent colour but less type. The most important characteristics of an Aby are type and character - people tend to forget that an Aby is not just colour.



WHAT ARE YOUR COMMENTS ON GREY UNDERCOAT AND WHERE IS IT COMING FROM ?

When I sell a kitten meant for breeding, I always try to ensure there is no grey on the shoulders. I find that grey undercoat is very persistent; if your female has it, you must look for a stud who has absolutely none, and even then you still need lots of luck. As regards the source of the grey undercoat, I believe that the Abyssian is descended from the Felis Lybica group; I have descriptions of F. Lybica which are almost like the standard of our Aby. This F. Lybica has a yellowish to grey undercoat in dry regions, and in more humid parts an orange to orange-red undercoat. So the grey in the Aby today may very well be leftover from its wild ancestors.

I UNDERSTAND THAT YOUR ORIGINAL ABYS DIDN'T HAVE THAT MUCH GREY IN THEIR UNDERCOATS, BUT BECAME TROUBLESOME WITH THE AMERICAN IMPORTS ?

When I discovered I was fighting a losing battle to keep the English lines fertile, I imported a beautiful Usual male from the United States: Wohl-Rabe's Orchid had a sweet temperament and a good undercoat. He had good type, less than ours but good for American standards; he did well at shows and became Int.Ch. However, with some of the American imports, together with the very warm undercoat, <sup>came</sup> a predisposition to grey. Furthermore, I believe Blue influences the colour of the undercoat in a Usual. When you cross with Silvers, the colour gets a yellowish shade, but with blue it becomes grey because Blue is in fact grey.

SORREL AND BLUE ARE BOTH RECESSIVES THAT CAN BE CARRIED BY A USUAL. SORREL SEEMS TO HAVE NO INFLUENCE, SO WHY DO YOU THINK THAT BLUE DOES HAVE AN EFFECT ?

Because a Sorrel is a warm colour while a Blue has an oatmeal undercoat. The only way you can get a warm colour is through selection, by breeding together Abys with warm undercoats. In this respect I'm certain that Blue does not add anything positive.

I HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT BLACK ON THE BACK OF THE HIND LEGS HAS DECREASED IN COMPARISON WITH EARLIER ABYS.

Yes, and this is probably due to the fact that we deliberately crossed Sorrels and Usuals. It was a matter of concern in those days; you could not restrict yourself to Sorrel X Sorrel matings because if you did, ticking - and above all, colour - could deteriorate.

I HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT MORE ABYS USED TO HAVE EAR TUFTS. ALSO, DO YOU THINK THAT ABYS WITH TUFTS SHOW MORE BARRING ?

It is true that ear tufts occur less often than, say, twenty years ago, but I'm not at all certain what caused this. That Abys with tufts are also more barred is, to me, just a fairytale !

JUST AS IT IS A FAIRYTALE THAT YOU CAN BREED BETTER USUALS  
WHEN YOU RESTRICT YOURSELF TO USUAL X USUAL MATINGS ?

For years I have, as a matter of principle and against established opinions, crossed Sorrels and Usuals, because the Sorrels had certain qualities which the Usuals lacked, and vice versa. Through this, I got Sorrels with good ticking. The decrease in the black on the hind legs of the Usual was unfortunately part of the bargain. I thought some Sorrel lines to be richer in colour and since my Usuals tended to run to barring but my Sorrels did not, I cleared up my Usuals with them.

YOUR FIRST ABY, TAISHUN CLEONI, HAD A WHITE SPOT ON HER CHEST, SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS ADMITTED OPENLY. WHAT WOULD YOU NOW DO IF YOU HAD A KITTEN LIKE THAT ?

I'd find a good pet home for it.

AND WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH ITS LITTERMATES ?

First of all I would not breed with that combination again. As for the other kittens in the litter, I suppose I would also look for good pet homes. However, if next to a kitten with a white spot there appears one that looks like Best in Show material, you must stand awfully firm in your shoes when you decide to sell it as a pet ! We fortunately don't have to deal with that situation nowadays. But if it happened, I would keep the kitten and see whether white spots turned up in the next generation, and if so, that would be the end of the line.

I SUPPOSE THE SAME HOLDS FOR A KINKY TAIL ?

Fortunately we have virtually no kinky tails in our lines. This is just as well, because a kinky tail weighs more heavily with me than a white spot, because it is a deformation, while a white spot is just a cosmetic fault. However, if you are working with a line which has never before produced a kinky tail, try to recall how everything went during the birth process before giving up an entire line.

I UNDERSTAND YOU WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN GETTING THE SORREL  
ABYSSINIAN RECOGNIZED ?

You will recall that Mrs Winsor initially told me she had no Usual kittens, but only Sorrels; since they were not recognized, she thought she couldn't be of much help to me. However, through her enthusiastic letters she made me curious, and suggested how I might go about having the Sorrel recognized in case I decided to get one from her. I asked her why she didn't do that herself in England; she wrote back saying that she did not go to shows because she didn't like them, and in any case could not leave the house since there was no-one else to look after her cats. Becoming both curious and enthusiastic, I bought Tranby Dalila, a beautiful Sorrel female with deep green eyes. In October 1962, I took Dalila - the first Sorrel Aby on the Continent - and Cleoni to Paris, to what was then billed " the greatest cat show in the world " with over four hundred exhibits. In the next issue



of " Our Cats ", there appeared an article by Mrs Kathleen Yorke, the then president of the GCCF, who had been to the show. This is what she said in part: " I just cannot refrain from mentioning one cat I saw at a show in Paris which took my breath away. She sat in the palms of my steward's hands as a golden goddess, gazing into the past of some thousand years, aloof, dignified, and unperturbed, alone with her thoughts and yet surrounded by a great throng of admirers. I was spellbound to see such beauty in a living creature. She was a Red Abyssinian - and how I wish to own her ! "

When I read this, I immediately sent Mrs Yorke a letter, telling her that the Red Abyssinian she had seen in Paris was of English origin and was called Tranby Dalila; I also gave her Mrs Winsor's address for further enquiries. Some time later I got a letter from Winsor, who wrote, " What has happened I do not know, but all of a sudden a lot of judges are paying me visits to see my Red Abys ". To cut a long story short, at the spring meeting of that year, the GCCF recognized the Red Abyssinian.

HOW DID YOU PROVE THAT THE RED IN THE ABY WAS REALLY CINNAMON ?

At the time, I also had a Red Tabby short-hair. I saw Dalila standing beside him and thought that their colour was different. I already knew from Mrs Winsor that Usual X Sorrel matings would not produce tortoise-shell, because the Red was a recessive that could be carried by the Usual. I talked this over with Mr Doekse, the then chairman of FELIKAT, who said that if Dalila didn't produce tortoise-shell kittens, she could not be Red. He said that another Dutch breeder was producing true Red Abys by crossing with the Red Tabbies, so why didn't I try a test mating ? I swallowed three times, since in those days mating an Aby to another breed was, to me, a sacrilege. I took Iris, a Cinnamon daughter of Dalila, to Crossways Heritor who was the first Havana in The Netherlands, imported from England. There were three males in the resulting litter: two had dark chocolate ticking and the third light chocolate ticking like Iris. I had the feeling I had made an important discovery, but it turned out that nobody was interested. I wrote to England that the Red Abyssinian was not really red, but light brown, but the answer I got back was " they look red, so they are Red " ! Moreover, I encountered a lot of indignation because one was not supposed to cross Abys with other breeds. Everything I know about the origin of Cinnamon in our Abys points to Mr Brooke's Red Self as the source: he must have been a Cinnamon, otherwise they would have called him a Brown self.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD, FROM PURE LINES, ABYS UNUSUAL AS REGARDS TO TYPE, COLOUR OR LENGTH OF COAT ?

Not in the sense that I had Blue Abys and/or Somalis; nothing of the kind.



DOROTHY WINSOR ONCE WROTE IN A LETTER TO EDNA FIELD THAT YOU HAD SOME BLuish KITTENS IN A LITTER FROM SOTHIS AND CLEONI - IS THIS SO?

There were four kittens in Cleoni's first litter to Sothis; the two Usual males were born entirely grey, and I thought they were Blue. I even called one of them Novicio, because I thought I had a new colour. I had never seen a Blue Aby and this was how I imagined them to be. As an adult, Novicio had a beautiful soft orange undercoat, and he became Int. Ch. for Karen Schmidt ( Snorrehus ) in Sweden. Unfortunately, I have never bred Blue Abys. If I had, I certainly would have kept them - I kept everything that was new in those days.

CAN YOU INDICATE WHAT YOU THINK PERMISSIBLE IN LINE-BREEDING AND INBREEDING ?

The best results I had were from line-breeding. As well as Cleoni I had Assunta and Dalila, and when I imported Sothis, my friend, Dr Jebbink, imported Nigella Simba. The first time Assunta went to Simba, I kept Bonita, a Usual female, from the litter. After that Assunta was mated to Sothis, and from that litter I kept Emir, the Usual male who was the most important Aby I ever bred. So I had, in Emir and Bonita, a half-brother and half-sister, with the strongest factor, Assunta, doubled up. I have never had, in my entire life, a pair of Abys from which I could be so sure that every kitten I go would be top of the bill ! One after the other, they were beautiful Abys: Poema who went to France, Peregrino whom I kept as a stud, Hermoso who went to Denmark, and some that went to U.S.A.; they all had good undercoats of a deep warm orange colour. Line-breeding can give terrific results, but on the other hand, you find out what faults you have in your line, because they also double up. Always breed " upwards " or " downwards " - never use a full brother-sister combination, under any conditions, now matter how good they are. I found that even line-breeding is a risky business when your line is not 100%. Inbreeding has a bad influence on the breed; it weakens it.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR CATS WHEN YOU GO TO A SHOW AND YOU COME BACK ?

Not as much as it says in the books. I make sure that their eyes and ears are clean, and if necessary I brush their coats, but that's all - my Abys keep themselves clean ! When I return from the show, I put the show cats back with the others but not with young kittens, especially if they haven't yet had their vaccinations.

IS THERE SOMETHING I HAVE FORGOTTEN WHICH WE SHOULD HAVE DISCUSSED ?

Yes: we haven't discussed the Somali. I am not a longhair lover, but in some ways I have changed my mind since I started judging them. Strangely enough, they often have the ears and even the heads I want in my Abys; they stand high on their legs and are more alert than I expected from longhairs. These are all assets I didn't expect to find in the Somali. An Abyssinian, however, has a close-lying coat; an Aby is a shorthair cat that comes from the warm parts of the world where longhairs are not likely to be found. There is also the Variant problem. I am all in favour of calling these Variants " Shorthaired Somalis ", so

that any potential buyer knows that he or she is dealing with a hybrid that carries the longhair gene and looks like an Abyssinian.



Photo:  
Ch Taishun Jasmin

HARRY BLOK  
ABYRA HORAKHTY CATTERY, THE NETHERLANDS  
( Many thanks to Mr Blok and also to George Kennedy )



