PRACTICAL VALUE

Max von Stephanitz was not the creator of the German Shepherd Dog but the man who, out of many types of German shepherd dogs, chose one dog that became the foundation of the modern breed. In late 19th century Germany, there were many types of shepherd dogs that protected the flocks – mostly sheep – from thieves and predators. In old books they are called Schafrüde – sheepdogs.

When a number of European wars ended during the 17th century, the various states of Germany enjoyed more peace, and the tasks of these shepherd dogs changed. Large tracts of pastureland were cultivated, and predators such as the wolf, bear and lynx were virtually wiped out.

Pastureland was not fenced and the shepherd’s dog had to keep the flock from grazing on other people’s land. They were a kind of walking fence. Another job for the shepherd dog was driving the flock to pasture and back to their bedding areas. For breeding purposes, the dogs’ characteristics were unimportant; only their practical value counted – stamina, resistance to cold, and ‘Dressurfähigkeit’ – a typical German expression for trainability. Shepherd dogs that worked without barking were favored because barking dogs can frighten sheep, and frightened sheep get into a panic.

In different areas – Holstein, Brunswick, Thüringen, Saxen, Württemberg – various types of sheep dogs developed: with pricked ears, drop ears; short coats or long coats; wolf-grey or brownish-yellow; and light- or heavy-boned. All of them were shepherd dogs, but far from German Shepherd Dogs. In literature, some authors write about zotthaarige Schäferhunde – shaggy-haired shepherd dogs. During the summer, these coats were shaved by the shepherds. Gradually, the shaggy coats disappeared and by the end of the 19th century, they could be found only in southern Germany and in Brunswick.

MILITARY CAREER

When Max von Stephanitz was born, Germany as we know it today did not exist. Before 1871, there were loose connections between some German states...
– for example, Prussia and Bavaria. They spoke the same lan-
guage, shared a common history, but were, in fact, independent.
In 1871, the scattered states of southern and northern Germany
were unified into the German Reich. Wilhelm I von Hohen-
zollern, already King of Prussia, became the first emperor of
the German Empire.

When Max von Stephanitz was born in 1864, his native
city, Dresden, was part of the Kingdom of Saxony, but in 1871,
Saxony and Dresden became part of the Empire. Max’s parents
– Friedrich Wilhelm von Stephanitz and his second wife, Maria
Münch (or Mänch) – were described as well-to-do, and
Friedrich Wilhelm as a person of private means. Young Max
became a student at the Vitzhumsche Gymnasium in Dresden,
where he learned to speak fluent French. Max wanted to study
agriculture, but his mother decided that he should have a mili-
tary career, like many other members of German noble families
at that time.

During his service, Max visited the Veterinärschule (Vet-
erinary School) in Berlin, where he gained useful knowledge
about biology, anatomy and kinetics. Later he took advantage
of this knowledge when breeding and judging dogs.

In 1898, von Stephanitz was promoted to Rittmeister – a
rank for cavalry officers. However, shortly thereafter he was
forced to leave the army “da er eine Dame von der Bühne
geheiratet hatte” – because he married a lady of the stage. Pre-
sumably this is an euphemism for a marriage beneath his station
and maybe his wife was indeed an actress. Leaving the army
was not voluntary and after his dismissal he became a Rittmeis-

STREBEL AND BECKMANN

In 1863, a year before von Stephanitz was born, the first
German dog show was held in the St. Pauli-Turnhalle in Ham-
burg; 453 dogs were entered.

German dog writers Richard Strebel and Ludwig Beck-
mann, who published books about German dog breeds at the
end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, had their
breed preferences. Strebel liked the shepherd dogs from
Brunswick and Holstein; he had in mind – reasoning by means
of analogies – the development of Scottish shepherd dogs into
a working dog and “luxury dog”, i.e. a companion dog for peo-
ple and/or showdog. On the other hand, Ludwig Beckmann was of the opinion
that it would be impossible to develop
one single breed from all those different
types of shepherd dogs. His opinion
was that there should be at least three
different dog breeds. He was wrong.

By 1890, Beckmann and Max
Hartenstein – a well-known breeder of
Schnauzers and Newfoundland Dogs –
had written a breed standard; a prick ear
and hanging tail were already two of
the requirements. With regard to color,
this old standard mentioned: black,
iron-gray, ash-gray, reddish-yellow;
solid or with symmetrical yellow or
white-gray markings on the muzzle,
around the eyes and on the legs. White
was permitted, as well as white with
large dark markings, and dark brindle
with or without yellow markings. A
short muzzle was regarded as a serious
fault.

It was von Stephanitz’s daughter
Herta who told us how and when her fa-
ther met shepherd dogs. While serving

Horand von Grafrath (SZ 1), formerly known as Hektor Linksrhein. This male is considered the foundation of the present German Shepherd Dog. Von Stephanitz paid 200 Marks for him in 1999.

The bitch Mira von Grafrath (SZ 112), owned by kennel von der Krone, later owned by Max von Stephanitz.
the army as an adjutant in the Kürassier-Regiment Graf Gessler, a cavalry unit in the Prussian army, von Stephanitz was billeted along the River Rhine where, from a hillside, he enjoyed a view of the river banks, and of a shepherd with his flock and dog. He watched long and closely as the dog herded the sheep while the shepherd took a nap. Impressed, he decided on the spot that he wanted to purchase such a dog. From that moment, he knew how his ideal shepherd dog should look, and what the dog should be able to do: every job with the flock.

PRICK-EARED SHEPHERD DOGS

In 1882, two Shepherd Dogs – Kiriss and Greif – were entered at a show in Hannover. Greif was described as white all over and this seems to be the first record of a white Shepherd Dog. In 1885, at a show in Neubrandenburg, about 10 Shepherd Dogs were entered and Greif was present again, but his coat was described as white and yellow. During those years, almost every Shepherd Dog was owned by a shepherd and they were not interested in pure breeding.

In 1891, Count C. Hahn and other fanciers founded Phylax, a club for Shepherd Dogs, mainly in north and central Germany. Due to disagreements, this club did not last long and was dissolved in 1894. Some members considered the Shepherd Dog a working dog only; others wanted to develop a show dog – a so-called “luxury dog.” In the same year, four “prick-eared Shepherd Dogs” were entered at a dog show in Dortmund, and at a working test in Berlin one could admire 22 Shepherd Dogs, all prick-eared.

In 1897, von Stephanitz bought a bitch, Freya von Grafrath. It is possible that she had another name before 1897. She was entered in the stud book after von Stephanitz bought her and her ancestry is unknown.

HOOLIGAN

Retired from the army, von Stephanitz bought Jahrholzwieshof, a rural estate near Grafrath in Bavaria. It was far away from his birthplace, but he seemed to have enough income to support his family, the estate and dogs. For him, England provided the model of how working dogs should be bred. His own first attempts, however, did not have the result he wanted.

In 1899, von Stephanitz and his friend Arthur Meyer visited a dog show in Frankfurt, to watch the judging of Shepherd Dogs. Spotting a dog in the ring that fulfilled his expectations, von Stephanitz did not hesitate and bought the dog – Hektor Linksrhein – on the spot. Born on January 1, 1895, Hektor descended from dogs in Thüringen and Frankfurt and was bred by Z. Sparwasser, who lived in Frankfurt. Von Stephanitz paid 200 German Marks plus 22 Marks allowance for expenses, quite a lot of money in those days. Hektor had been bought and sold several times before von Stephanitz acquired him. Kennel von der Krone was one of his former owners.

As was usual at that time, Hektor got a new name; von Stephanitz renamed him Horand von Grafrath. This purchase by von Stephanitz is crucial in the history of the present German Shepherd Dog – Horand became the foundation of the breed as we know it today.

We know Horand’s characteristics, because there is a picture of him, as well as a description: height 24 inches, strong bones, a good head and well-shaped body.
According to Hans Räber in his Enzyklopädie der Rassehunde (Encyclopaedia of Dog Breeds), Horand was “an incorrigible hooligan,” giving von Stephanitz many worries.

In 1900, von Stephanitz started a stud book for German Shepherd Dogs. At that time, there was no central stud book; the breed clubs kept their own. Horand was the first entry in the Schäferhunde Zuchtbuch – SZ 1. His parents were Kastor (Pollux x Schäfermädchen) and Lene Sparwasser (Greif von Sparwasser x Lotte Sparwasser). Both were later entered in the stud book: SZ 153 and SZ 156.

“The best information is given by the dog’s expression and eyes, and their setting. The eye must express no malice and deceit, no unrestrained unruliness, but also not laziness, cowardice or fear. The way the dog looks at people should be bright, imprudent, open but reserved.” – von Stephanitz, 1923

Shortly after von Stephanitz bought Horand, he and Meyer founded the Verein für Deutsche Schäferhunde (SV); von Stephanitz was elected chairman. Both gentlemen drew up the breed standard, which was adopted at a general meeting. First, von Stephanitz divided the coat into three varieties: rough-haired, smooth-haired and long-haired. The club’s inaugural meeting was attended by von Stephanitz, three shepherds, two factory owners, an architect, a mayor, a café owner and an office worker.

In 1902, von Stephanitz was one of the founders of the Verein zur Förderung der Zucht und Verwendung von Polizeihunden (PHV) – Club for the Promotion of the Breeding and Training of Police Dogs. Being a fierce supporter of the working German Shepherd Dog, von Stephanitz was very interested in this branch of cynology. Thanks to von Stephanitz and his standard work Der deutsche Schäferhund in Wort und Bild (The German Shepherd Dog in Word and Picture), the German Shepherd Dog became one of the most popular breeds in the world.

Von Stephanitz benefited from the spirit of the age: nobility and a military rank were on an equal footing with authority and the Rittmeister was no exception to that rule. Von Stephanitz’s dog (the chairman’s dog) was used extensively for breeding; Horand produced 53 litters with 35 different bitches and had 149 registered offspring. In the beginning, von Stephanitz was inbreeding and line breeding and within a relatively short time he achieved uniformity in type.

A well-known son of Horand was Hektor von Schwaben (SZ 13), born in 1898. It was said that his dam, Mores von Plieningen (SZ 159), had a wolf as grandparent or great-grandparent. Later, von Stephanitz denied this rumour. According to Dutch dog writer Ruud Haak in his Duitse Herders en hun verzorging (German Shepherds and their Maintenance), Mores could be considered the progenitress of the German Shepherd; others mention Mari von Grafrath (SZ 2). One of Horand’s grandsons, Beowulf (SZ 10) born in 1899, certainly set his stamp on the breed.

As with so many other breeds, World War I (1914-18) proved to be disastrous for the German Shepherd Dog. Various sources mention that in this war 30,000 German Shepherd Dogs were sent into action at the front, as messenger dogs, for example, or guard dogs. After the war, dogs were in great demand and breeding became big business. In 1920, the Swiss breeder Otto Rahm (kennel Wohlen) talked about a Schäferhundepidemie – a German Shepherd epidemic – and warned against “ein überwinkelter Hinderhand” – an over-angulated rear. In the first quarter of the 20th century, judges were also worried about the breed’s overall quality. To avoid the total decline of the breed, the SV drew up strong regulations for judging the dogs. No pedigree was given to the offspring of dogs that did not pass the tests. It was a rigid measure, but it paid off.

Before WWI, relations between the German and Swiss breed clubs were friendly, but after the war the friendship disintegrated and there was criticism from the Swiss, who were irritated by the Kaserntonten des Rittmeisters (the Rittmeister’s commanding tone) and were annoyed because von Stephanitz demanded that Swiss members of the club pay their membership in pre-war valuta (rate of exchange). The difference between 50 Marks for German members and 520 Marks for Swiss members went down the wrong way.
Von Stephanitz managed “his” breed club in an authoritarian way; as an officer, he was used to giving and obeying orders. He ruled that German Shepherd Dogs from Switzerland could be exhibited in Germany only after they were entered in the German stud book.

Politics started to play a role in von Stephanitz’s demands as well as elsewhere. The Americans had called the breed German Sheep Dog from 1908-18 but deleted “German” from the name after WWI and recognized the breed as Shepherd Dog from 1919-31. The French renamed the breed Chien Berger d’Alsace. In 1919, The Kennel Club (U.K.) recognized the breed as Alsatian Wolf Dog (but dropped “Wolf Dog” after 1926). In 1977, the name was changed to German Shepherd Dog (Alsatian); the word “Alsatian” was removed in 2010.

“Practical value is the only touchstone for beauty.”
– Rittmeister Max von Stephanitz

SELF-APPOINTED JUDGE
Aside from being a breeder, von Stephanitz was a (self-appointed) judge and a dog writer. Still being the chairman of the breed club, he judged the Championship Show (Sieger Ausstellung) in 1925, awarding Klodo vom Boxberg (SZ 135239), born in 1921, Best of Breed. Eyewitnesses reported “an unbearable tension” over his choice of winner. In many respects, Klodo differed from his predecessors and he passed his type on to his offspring. For experts in the breed it was clear: a new era in breeding had come. This show was the boundary line between the old and new German Shepherd Dog.

A highlight in von Stephanitz’s life must have been his judging, in 1930, at the Morris & Essex Kennel Club Show held on the New Jersey estate of Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge. Von Stephanitz drew so many entries that the dogs had to be judged on the first day and the bitches on the second. Von Stephanitz wrote a critique on every dog, despite the large entry. Several von Grafrath dogs were later exported to the States.

Von Stephanitz’s most famous book, Der deutsche Schäferhund in Wort und Bild, was first published in 1901 as a small booklet, but by the sixth printing, in 1921, the book had developed into a standard work with hundreds of illustrations. It’s available to read online at archive.org/details/derdeutschesc00step. Chapters from this book were published as Sonderdruck (special printings) – for example, Die Erziehung und Ausbildung des Hundes (Raising and Training Dogs).

HERTA VON STEPHANITZ
Little is known about von Stephanitz’s private life, but we know he had a son, Otto, and a daughter, Herta. Following in her father’s footsteps, Herta also wrote a book about the German Shepherd Dog. When interviewed by American author Winifred Gibson Strickland, Herta explained why her father withdrew from the breed club in 1935. During his whole life, von Stephanitz kept hammering at the need for the German Shepherd Dog to remain a working dog. However, in the 1930s, the breed club acquired some new members who belonged to the Nazi party. They wanted to emphasize beauty, even threatened von Stephanitz, and after 36 years he resigned. And indeed, in the Third Reich the German Shepherd Dog became the symbol of typical German virtues such as courage and loyalty.

Von Stephanitz died on April 22, 1936, 37 years after the founding of the Schäferhunde Verein. He was 71 years old and died only a few days after his last favorite dog, Egga, passed away.