

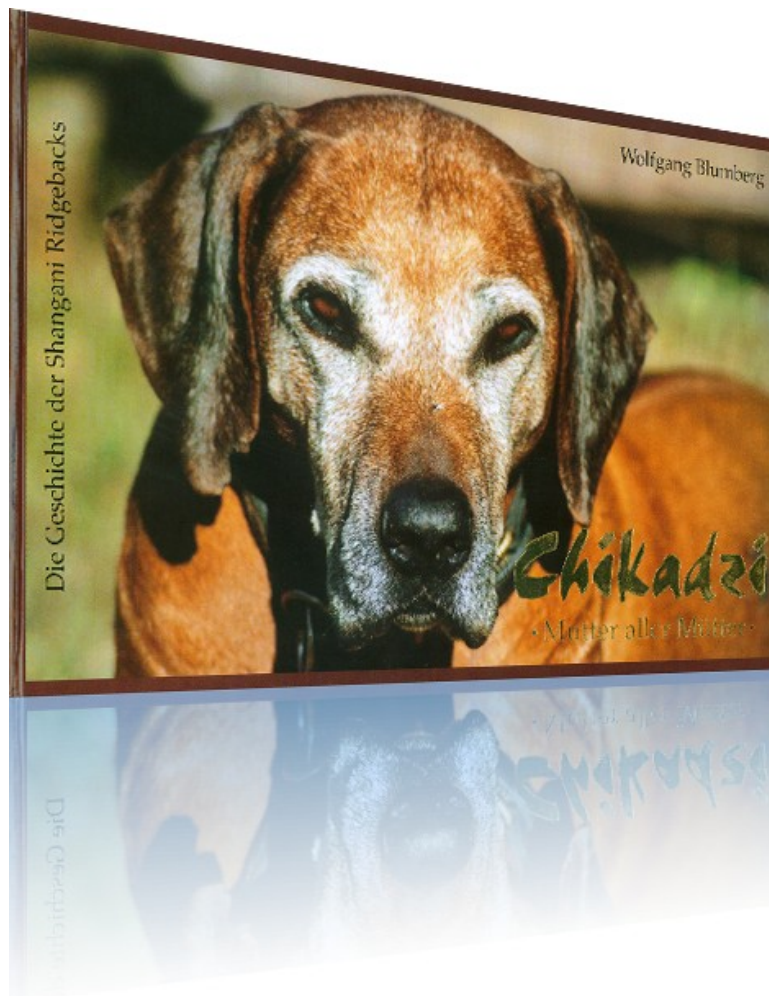


The story of the Shangani Ridgebacks

Wolfgang Blumberg

# Chikadzö

•Mother of Mothers•



Extract

April 22, 2005

Chikadzi died at five o'clock this morning in La Maurette. She decided to leave us in dignity. At home, with us. In our arms. With a smile on her face. This afternoon, we buried her on her favorite hill, in Petignons, under the leafy green shadow of the tall trees. Her three daughters, Askari, Pea Doya and Sarula stood as in a silent tribute to her. We hold each other, weeping. Chikadzi, the foundation bitch of all Shangani, is dead. For more than a decade, twelve long years, she ruled her pack, letting her family become bigger and bigger, leaving behind traces and tales of herself to so many who knew her. Now she is silent, handing over the great Book of the Shangani family to another. She has entrusted it to me. So, in honor of Chikadzi, I will try to carry on with the Shangani story, upholding our history.

(...)

Both of our foundation Ridgebacks carried the noble pedigrees and blood of the ZKC pedigree. Our breeding objectives and long term perspectives were crystal clear: we wanted to preserve and breed with the original genuine nature and appearance of the Ridgeback. In order to assess a Rhodesian Ridgeback, one must always consider where, by whom, and for what purpose these dogs were originally bred. The breed standard, which was devised later, should only serve as a guideline, because there are many more unwritten but substantial characteristics that define what a good, genuine Ridgeback really is. It isn't always the one who is the most successful in the show ring that is the best.

We don't want a Shangani to become a city dog, never let off the leash to discover nature, or a status symbol or even like a little trained monkey in the show ring. On the contrary, a Shangani should possess a strong hunting and protective instinct, and in appearance he should stand out with a red wheaten color, a strong fundament and bones, and elegant movement. This is the vision we have followed, when we chose our matings for our breeding program. The focus was always on undiluted African bloodlines, preferably real Rhodesian bloodlines whenever possible. Line breeding was never taboo to us, but rather served as incentive to help us keep our breeding program target oriented and on track. We were successful and had set backs, from which we learned.

(...)

The Shangani pack had grown to an impressive dimension by the year 2002. There were nine Ridgebacks, living together like one big family. Three adult males, Matobo with his two sons Pacha and Pansa Dafina and six bitches, Chikadzi with her three daughters Askari, Pea Doya and Sarula Gani, as well as her two granddaughters Chambela and Ranzi Etosha. The dogs' age ranged between nine years old and one year old. Both of our houses in Roquebrune are situated in the wild countryside, and have large pieces of land, inside an even large forested area, allowing our pack to live at liberty in a natural environment. This is certainly one of the few Ridgeback packs of it's kind within Europe, living under such free and natural conditions. We don't have outdoor kennels or boxes for our dogs. The pack lives with us, and we live with them. As leader of the pack Christine and I have had to learn many, many hard and bitter lessons, until we finally came to understand all of the fundamental pack behavior and interaction within the pack, the individual character of every single Ridgeback, and most of all the unbelievable dynamic that exists within the pack. The pack is steered by a finely woven net of social communication and order, which always varies in intensity, that has to be understood and respected.

Chikadzi was the leader of the Shangani pack from the very beginning and she remained so for many long years, up until the time of her death. Her status was due to her physical stature and strength--she weighed between forty to forty three kilos, had a body and chest that was better than

most males-- her superior intelligence and her extremely dominant hunting and protective instincts. She led the pack to hunt and she decided which visitors would be greeted warmly, only tolerated, or even refused. Everyone in the pack bowed to her authority, even the three big males. The few times that her authority was challenged she took it in her stride.

(...)

For the first time as breeders, we had been hit hard by dermoid sinus in our line. We had to learn how sensitive and delicate this subject really is among Ridgeback breeders, and the resulting strong opinions about how sinus should be treated. Of course, everyone thinks that their opinion is justly right and fair to the dogs. But in any event it is a topic that requires a breeder to take a definite position on. Dermoid sinus is a known genetic defect.

The number of sinus cases today in the Shangani line totals six percent. Each of the operations performed to remove the sinus were successful, which means that the affected Ridgebacks were able to live a fully normal and happy life as a family pet.

In our eyes it is part of our fundamental belief that a dermoid sinus puppy should never be culled from the litter by killing it.

In the meantime we have heard about and know of many others, especially the so called experts and those club officials holding breeding offices, who have a fully different opinion about this, who believe in killing dermoid sinus puppies.

In England, euthanasia of dermoid sinus puppies for all breeders is anchored into the Club bylaws. In France, the Charte d'Élevage requires breeders to do the same thing. Those breeding officers in the Swiss Club, also demand that sinus puppies should be killed. In Switzerland they also euthanise healthy ridgeless puppies. This is an ethical transgression that in our opinion shows a complete lack of responsibility of the breeders towards their dogs. In order to justify their euthanasia policy, they use medical arguments. We suspect, however that there is commercial motivation behind this euthanasia policy. A medical operation is expensive, and a sinus or a ridgeless puppy or even a puppy born with too much white will bring the breeder less money. Death by lethal injection is certainly the most comfortable way for them to deal with the situation. In addition, breeders stand to damage their reputation by having a high defect rate in their litters.

This is a horrible way of thinking, from which we would like to distance ourselves as far as possible. All of our dogs, and their puppies are like our children, and we treat them and take care of them as such. Whenever necessary, we are ready to do everything in our power to help them. It doesn't matter how the chances stand in the mid – and -- long term. The important thing is that they are given a chance, no matter how small.

(...)

Occasionally we tell some of our friends and acquaintances about our dogs' hunting expeditions, and they tell us we should look after them a bit better, and take better care of them, or was it really necessary to take such risks with them. If you have a Ridgeback in the kind of natural environment that he deserves then it is impossible to live without taking these risks, in my opinion. Over time we came to understand this. The fact that our dogs are allowed to hunt and patrol without human restrictions, at one with the countryside and nature, means a great deal to them. They aren't afraid of being injured. When they are hunting, they aren't afraid of death either. For them it means absolute freedom to follow their instincts, and to be able to act out their hunting instincts to the fullest. They don't understand our human fears and the anxiety that we feel during their absence. We should be very careful not to look at such events out of the perspective of our selfish human ego. Of course for us it would be a terrible tragedy if one of our dogs didn't return to us after a hunt. We do try to limit the risk of this kind of catastrophe.

But it just wouldn't be fair to our dogs, to repress their desire for freedom just to save ourselves from the pain of a tragic accident or the fear of our losing them. A good Ridgeback loves his freedom to hunt. And if he should fall victim to his prey during a fight, and never return again, then at least it was a better and more honorable death than one in which he was never allowed to do anything, and at the end of a long illness has to be put to sleep by the vet. In order to answer the question of what taking care of a dog really means, one cannot forget to look at what this means from the dog's point of view.

(...)

Through our careful approach at choosing who will belong to the Shangani family, we can say after ten years that there are fewer than ten people who would never again receive a puppy from us. That is the equivalent of about a five percent error rate of those who had once gained our trust. Today the Shangani family is a large, intact community, whose members are found throughout the world. In the last twelve years, we have bred seven bitches with twenty one litters and one hundred ninety seven puppies, one hundred three males, and ninety four bitches. Our four male stud dogs in the pack, Ashanti, Matobo, Pacha and Pansa can boast of more than forty successful matings. More than six hundred Ridgebacks in the world today can call a member of the Shangani family as sire or dam. This number increases to several thousands, if one includes those who have grand or great-grand parents originating within the Shangani family. In Europe, one can find Shangani Ridgebacks in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, England, Estonia, France, The Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Croatia, Luxemburg, Norway, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland and the Czech Republic.

Outside Europe, you can find Shangani Ridgebacks in Guam, Israel, Kurdistan, Namibia, New Zealand, Upper Volta, Singapore, South Africa, Uruguay, USA, Uzbekistan and Venezuela. These Ridgebacks have won about one hundred champion titles to enhance the family reputation, and to the great joy of their owners.



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