

# 'People will remember'

***We talk with Joe Bihari, breeder, owner and handler of Champions, FVs, FVXs, MVs, MVxs, GVs, GVxs and Select Champions far too numerous to list here.***

***Editor's note:*** This interview was conducted Feb. 24, 2008, at the home of Joe Bihari in Monsey, NY, by Dr. Robin R. Lyle, whom we thank profusely for his detailed work.

*Joe Bihari has been breeding, showing, training and handling German Shepherd Dogs for more than 60 - yes, SIXTY - years. He began as a boy in Hungary, fled in 1956 with "Rex," and eventually started a new life in America. His story is captivating. A miniscule portion is presented here. Mr. Bihari is an authority on the German Shepherd whom few can rival. We are ever grateful for his acceptance of our interview request.*

**Kennel Name:** [Bihari Shepherds](#)

**Location:** Monsey, NY (32 miles northwest of New York City)

**Occupation:** Retired kennel owner

**GSDbyDesign: How many years have you been involved with GSDs?**

**Joe:** Approximately 63 years.

**GSDbyDesign: How did you get started in your breeding program?**

**Joe:** I came from the second largest industrial city, Miskolc, in the northern part of Hungary. My father's name is Joseph and my mother's name is Julia and I had one younger brother, Gyula (George). I was born in 1925 in a town called Borsodgeszp. My father was a farmer of grapes in this wine country. He also raised herding dogs. In my early years I enjoyed breeding and raising rabbits.

After my schooling, I became a waiter and lived in an apartment above a restaurant that did not permit dogs. The desire became so great to become a dog owner that it became necessary for me to move in order to acquire my first Shepherd. This male, a sable, I named Pajtas (pronounced Pitosh), which means "my pal". He was imported from Czech. I was 17 years old when I started to work at places that would allow me to have my dog. My dog, Pajtas, became trained in obedience and also trained for protection purposes. I chose the shepherd for its ability to be a companion and because of its trainability and overall appearance.

Later on in my life, I traveled to Budapest and gave the dog my parents. The dog went on to sire many litters, mostly with the lovely street ladies. Pajtas become very well-known around town.

After a while, I returned to Miskolc where I acquired my first bitch, a black and tan, and bred her. I spent much of my time seeking out the old-timers in the breed, and gained much knowledge from them. The late-night debates started there. This first bitch, Heidi, produced a litter of seven puppies. So began the breeding program of Joe Bihari. Before leaving Hungary for the United States, I had become the biggest breeder in Hungary. When I went to a show, I was almost certain to go home with most of the awards.

Next came Rex. On one occasion, while I was riding my bicycle, I could not help but spot a four-month-old pup. It was important for me to stop and ask the lady where this pup had come from. The woman explained that she got the Shepherd puppy from a soldier who worked for Border Patrol. His dam was named Roka (which means fox) who was almost an entire black bitch. The first four or five years, they trained the dog for tracking because of problems with smuggling and immigration. This dog was famous for being the top tracking dog along the Austrian border. It is important to mention that this dog once tracked an actual smuggler over the border and 7 miles to a house, where Roka even took the man out of his bed.

Roka was sent to a post in Miskolc, when she retired from the border, to whelp, having been bred to a Czech import dog from Germany. The German government only allowed six puppies per litter. Rex was the seventh puppy in that litter. The woman's husband was a Captain

at that post. He was the one who brought the puppy home for her to keep. (There were actually eight in the litter. Joe later found the eighth, a bitch, when she was about 1 1/2 years old, and bought her.) It took me almost six weeks to convince this woman to sell me that puppy. After owning Rex for three days, he got lost. Maria accidentally left the gate open and Rex disappeared for three days. Everyone (police, postmen, friends) was out looking for this lost puppy. There was a circus in town and that's exactly where we found Rex.

My kennel name at that time was Miskolci Heydirda, which means "seven devils." This was named for my first litter of seven puppies. My Rex was different from other dogs in the country. He had more bone. He looked different. We began fighting about who had the best dog. I went to a show and Rex became Best of Breed when he was only one year old at the National show that was held in Hungary. He became the Grand Victor over all breeds that were entered in the show in 1954. Later in 1955, Rex became the Grand Victor for a second time which was a high accomplishment.

In September 1956, at a show that is almost like an all-breed National, Rex went Best of Breed - they have three judges there. This was his third time as Grand Victor. His record says "Victor Forever." No other dog has earned that before or since. At this same weekend, he became Obedience Victor. I have pictures with the mayor of the city presenting me the trophy. Not long after that, we had the Revolution (the Hungarian Revolution against Russian occupation).

But someone from the government recognized Rex's pedigree and knew where this special dog had come from. They determined that Rex was the seventh puppy from Roka's litter. I explained the story to the General and as a result of all the time and training that I had invested in Rex, I was allowed to keep him. Rex returned to the National in 1956 and became Grand Victor for a third time. This had never ever been accomplished before. Rex was also OV. The Best of Breed is judged by three judges.

This experience has and will ever be a big part of one of my life's fondest memories in my continual love for the Shepherd breed.

**GSDbyDesign: Would you briefly recount the story of your escape from Hungary in 1956? (Editor's note: In October 1956, the Hungarians revolted against Russian occupation. An estimated 20,000 people were killed during the Soviet intervention, according to the Encyclopaedia Humana Hungarica. Joe was 31 years old.)**

**Joe:** We left Miskolc at 3 a.m. with 13 people, nine dogs and four children, and took a train to Budapest. We walked to the train station and took a long ride to what we later learned was 10 miles from the Austrian border. We carried little except the clothes on our backs. We wanted to make it as inconspicuous as possible that we were trying to run away.

The final stop was a barn and here we met 22 others taking shelter - 22 others with the same aim - crossing the border into Austria.

We decided to stay as a group but it wasn't easy. None of the 22 others wanted any part of Rex. A dog would bark or run about and give us away was the general consensus. But I was adamant and won out. Rex stayed and become our leader. He could see, hear, and smell where we couldn't. If there was danger he would warn us.

The last few miles to Austria were through a sea of mud that was sometimes hip-deep. All around were Russian mounted patrols. Rex headed the party on the leash.

Rex was trained to guard, attack and disarm a man. But he did none of these things. Suddenly he froze and signaled with a low growl. It was a growl only I could hear. He was trained that way. He was pointing straight ahead. It was not safe to go. We retreated about a half-mile and suddenly stumbled on a trampled down barbed-wire fence that meant the border. We crossed into Austria. But just as we made it, we heard shots in the direction from where Rex had given us the warning. We knew then that Rex had saved our lives.

**GSDbyDesign: Who are some of your all-time favorite GSDs (of your own breeding or otherwise)?**

**Joe:** Early on at that time I really liked the double Grand Victor - 1966 and 1968 GV CH Yoncalla's Mike ROM. I also liked the "Bear Dog", CH Stuttgart's Sundance Kid ROM. I had a lot of favorites, but it's not any one dog. It's so many similarities in so many different ways. Again it's not just one dog in Germany, or the United States, or Canada.

I like Indy, for sure (CH Woodhaven's In Search Of TC ROM). He did a lot for me and many of his progeny. I still have Tina (Am Sel CH MVx Can CH Carobs Tina of Bihari, Indy's daughter). I showed her first in the Futurity. After that, five weeks - five shows - undefeated to finish, even up to Best of Breed to Maturity Victrix to Select #3. I'm proud to say that because it doesn't happen that many times. She was just as good in the whelping box as in the ring. She produced nice progeny.

**GSDbyDesign: What is the most important quality to you in a GSD?**

**Joe:** The most important is the temperament. When I talk about temperament, you can have the most beautiful structured dog but if the dog doesn't have attitude or temperament - I call it desire to work - you don't have anything. Temperament is the number one. Temperament is the most important. If you don't have that, you don't have anything. Anything you do with the dog - obedience, protection, show, etc. - the purpose you want the dog for, without temperament you have nothing.

**GSDbyDesign: What problem(s) do you think are most prevalent in the breed?**

**Joe:** I can put it in one word: mediocre. Too many mediocre dogs! By mediocre, I mean mostly the gait. Their structure does not create the gait we want to see. The correct movement is like what we saw (Sunday, Feb. 24, 2008) in John and Nancy Vaught's dog (Masstana's Just in Case OFA EXC, who finished with a 4-point major at the Rockland County KC show). With a correct dog, when they gait, it is very pleasing to the eye. The gait is so harmonious. The whole dog's structure is pleasing you in motion. If some part is not working with the whole dog, you have to know what it is. This is so difficult to learn. Harmonious movement is created by correct structure. In this is included all parts of the dog's structure. This is when both ends work together with a middle piece that is not soft or hunchy. You have to count everything into the harmonious beautiful structure in what we have now (we didn't use to have it) - suspended sidegait.

**GSDbyDesign: When you select a puppy, what are you looking for? Be as specific as possible.**

**Joe:** That's a big question that is very hard to answer. With puppies, the first impression is important. At an early age, from 8 weeks to 6 months or a year, a lot of things change. There is the change that puppies go through until the time a puppy is ready to take points. The puppy is going through a lot of changes. Sometimes they look good; but not good later. The final thing is when they are two years old, when the dog is ready to go for the points.

**GSDbyDesign: Who was/is the most influential person in your breeding program?**

**Joe:** There are three people who have been very influential in my breeding program:

1. Ernie Loeb. I was very fortunate to meet Ernie in 1962, when he invited me to his home and offered me two imported bitches for breeding for some puppies in return. That was the start of a friendship that would last the rest of our lives.

In 1964, we went to Germany for the first time together and he helped me buy my first import, Greif v Asterplatz, from Walter Martin. We went together almost every year after that until about 1990. What a privilege and honor it was to travel on the plane and in a car throughout Germany with a man who had such knowledge and respect from all over the world. It was an

unforgettable experience to be able to meet the top Shepherd people from around the globe. We went to many, many dog clubs throughout Germany and listened to the breeder's open discussions about the breed. When Ernie talked, everyone listened.

2. Walter (and Herman) Martin
3. James Moses

**GSDbyDesign: What do you find to be the best thing about being involved in GSDs?**

**Joe:** Being in dogs and especially German Shepherd Dogs has been the most rewarding, most pleasant thing for me to do because I had the natural ability. I had other occupations, barber and waiter, but I also saw shape differently. If I saw someone do something, anything, and put that into my mind; I was able to re-do that because it was in my mind, my computer. It was as if I had a picture in front of me. Even today, I can talk about a dog I saw 40 years ago.

**GSDbyDesign: What are your goals in the breed?**

**Joe:** My goal is to see better and better German Shepherd Dogs. I want to reach perfection. It's never going to happen because nothing is perfect. When you get close to it, something seems to sneak in.

In obedience you can reach perfection in points - you can achieve the 200 points. But in structure, you can't. A lot of people say this is perfect, but it's not. The only way to get the perfect answer is to ask the perfect question. This is very difficult.

**GSDbyDesign: What contributions to the German Shepherd Dog do you want to be remembered for?**

**Joe:** My main emphasis is always *education*. I spend so much time educating myself and other people about the breed, and driving forward for the sake of the betterment of the German Shepherd. I would like to be remembered for educating the new generation to improve or perfect the breed and to bring about the betterment of the breed.

I have always strived to be truthful, first to myself, and then to other people according to my understanding and knowledge. I don't claim to know it all about the German Shepherd Dog, but I know I try to be truthful to other people. I don't want to knowingly mislead people. If I make a mistake, and I find out later; I will admit it. No one is without fault or without mistake - nobody in the world. If you love something so much, you must try to be very honest about it, truthful about it, because it will follow you. People will remember. You have to know that. People will remember what you said and what you did.

**The German Shepherd by Design will be conducting interviews of notable breeders and handlers throughout 2008. If you would like to be featured on our website, please email Becky at [gdsbydesign@aol.com](mailto:gdsbydesign@aol.com).**