

The old Mountain Cow of the Carpathians

Until today there are areas in the Carpathian Mountains of Ukraine and Romania which are hard to reach, with low-developed infrastructure and economy, which are giving room to a population living of self-sustainable agriculture in form of family farms, with small gardens, green houses and a selection of domestic animals as horses, cows, pigs and chickens. Due to the remote location of some of these mountain areas, not only old traditions could be preserved, but also old breeds of domesticated animals. What seems already lost in the flatlands can still be detected in the harder to reach mountain areas: individuals of a former primitive mountain cattle, which is nowadays as good as extinct.

The rare representatives of this kind of mountain cow, which can still be detected within the area of Ukrainian Transcarpathia and Hutsulshina, and in the Romanian counties of Maramures, Bucovina and Moldova, can be divided into two main types: one to be primarily found in Transcarpathia, as well as in the high mountains of central Romania, the other exclusively in the Romanian and Ukrainian Hutsulshina.

1. Mocanitsa/Risca (old mountain cow of Transcarpathia)

Before the introduction of western Braunvieh (Schweizer/Montafoner/SwissBrown) into the Transcarpathian cattle population, the Ruthenian mountain people were keeping a small, sturdy mountain cow, which was perfectly suited for the challenges of the mountain world: harsh climate, steep “hills” and scarce food. It was giving small quantities of milk, but with a high fat and protein share, while eating only minimum amounts of food.

This small mountain breed was known to the Transcarpathian population as “our” cow distinguishing it from the bigger, imported breeds. Some documents speak of the name Risca, describing the small, reddish mountain cow of the Ruthenian Carpathians. In Romanian Carpathia the same cow could be found, eventually with small regional differences, listening to the name Mocany/Mocanitsa, meaning “the small one”.

Nowadays, Ukrainian Transcarpathia is populated by western cow breeds as Holstein, Simmentaler Pinzgau and others, whereas in the higher altitudes the dominating breed is the Buro-Carpathian Cow, which started its conquest under the Soviet Regime in Transcarpathia. The Buro-Carpathian Cow shows in fact many different faces, differences in height, colour, horn-shape etc., depending on the region and influences from other cow breeds.

1.1. Description

The higher the mountains, the more remote the region and worse the infrastructure, another type of cow can be identified, which clearly distinguishes itself from the Buro-Carpathian cow: A cow of small stature (between 110 and 115 cm height at withers), with a compact, stout figure.

The head is comparably short, but longish, with short, thin horns, which point upwards, sometimes a little backwards, and show white colour, with dark tips. The eyes are expressive and aware. Its tongue shows a dark blue colour and is quite coarse. The nose is of light colour, as well as the obligatory dorsal stripe, that clearly stretches along its back. The back is quite straight and fitting in length to the relation of the body size (not especially long). Overall the cow gives the impression of a compact, sportive body, although quite small-boned and slender.

The fur colour is a blend of black/dark brown/red, which gives the impression of a “wild” colour. The mucous membranes are dark coloured, whereas the inside of the ears are usually reddish, as well as the long hairs growing between its horns. The udder is small developed, with small teats and covered by thin hair. The milk yield of this type lies usually between 3 and 6 liters a day, with a very rich, sweet taste.

Photographs from the beginning of the 20th century suggest that this cow type was pre-dominant in the Transcarpathian area and was the origin of the breed, that later became “Buro-Carpathian” cow in mixture with the Swiss Brown. Which is leading to the conclusion that this type of cow, which can still be found in remote Transcarpathia, is the last remnant of the old mountain cattle Risca, that used to populate the Carpathian Mountains numerously. It is also showing strong similarities to other old breeds of short-horned mountain cattle, as for example the Busha cattle.

In the Romanian Carpathians individuals of the similar type could be identified, but the influences of other cow breeds were unfortunately much higher in these individuals, than in the Transcarpathian ones. The Transcarpathian type also doesn't show a clearly homogenous look, but differences are much smaller. They may vary in height, coloration of ears or utter, direction of the horns, but the overall impression is very similar, and a common type easily recognizable.



2. Old mountain cow of the Hutsulshina

The living condition in the so called “Hutsulshina”, the territory of the Huzul mountain people, was even harder and asked still more from humans as well as animals. Higher mountains, more limited vegetation and longer winters were responsible for a hard selection. The Hutsuls, a folk of shepherds, was depended on its animals to a high degree and therefore had also high demands for their characteristics. Sturdiness and perfect adaption to the low nutritious food was as much needed as a rich milk yield.

Nowadays, the Hutsulshina displays a great amount of Pinzgau or Pinzgau-Mix breeds. One of them is the Dorna cattle, a breed that emerged by the mix breeding of old mountain cattle and the imported Pinzgau.

The Dorna cattle are giving a first impression with their “non-Pinzgau” elements on how the former mountain cow of the Hutsulshina must have looked like. Extracting the elements that are clearly influenced by the Pinzgau breed, leaves us several characteristics, which are either accidental result of crossbreeding or quite likely: traces of the old mountain cow.



Dorna Cattle in Ukraine



Dorna Cattle in Romania

And in fact, few individuals can still be found in the Hutsulshina which create the impression of an own type, apart from the Dorna. They do not only carry the elements of the old mountain cattle that the Dorna displays, but also lack the Pinzgau characteristics to a wide extent. They are clearly forming another type together, being a remnant of the cows that once lived in the Hutsulshina, before the Pinzgau breed was so widely introduced. How close these individuals are actually related to the former original mountain cow is hard to determine. But identical individuals have been found on both sides of the border, Ukrainian as well as Romanian. Owners remember that predecessors of these animals were of a similar look and refer to them as “their type” of cow or calling it even “Hutsul”.



Mountain cow in Ukrainian Hutsulshina



Mountain cow in Romanian Hutsulshina

2.1 Description

These cows impress by their very short legs and overall height at withers between 105 cm and 110 cm. In relation to the height, the body is quite long and big, with strong developed hind quarters. In comparison to the body seize the head is small, longish and slightly angular. The thin horns are curved upwards, with a light colour and dark tips. The body is less athletic, with a round belly and a slightly inbound spine. The udder is well developed, as these cows can give up to 10 litres a day. Of special interest is the fur coloration. Most parts of the body are of a dark brown/black colour, whereas spine, the area on top of the ribs, and the upper part of the hindquarters are coloured in a red/brownish shade. The same colour can be found at the hair between horns, inside the ears, as well as around the muzzle. The mucous membranes are dark coloured.

So far, this type of cow could exclusively be found within the territory of the Hutsulshina, Ukrainian as well as Romanian, which suggests that this kind of cow is in some way rooted in the area. Interviews with owners of the described cattle can assure that individuals of their kind have inhabited the Hutsulshina for many generations, but so have Dorna- and Pinzgau cows. Detailed descriptions about the regional cattle which existed before the introduction of the Pinzgau breed are rare or difficult to access, a definite final conclusion therefore hard to make. The



A bull in the Romanian Hutsulshina

phenotypical founds lead to the assumption that the described individuals stand in the tradition of an older breed, which was populating the Carpathian Mountains before the introduction of foreign breeds, and laid the basis for nowadays cows in the Hutsulshina. Although to prove this conclusion also from a historical point of view, research has to be intensified.

3. Conclusion

Regardless of their differences and similarities, which each other or other breeds, fact is that the last representatives of the former Carpathian mountain cow are highly endangered. Not only are these cows of small size and comparably low milk yield not attractive for cow owners, they are not even valued nor recognized as an independent breed, their distinction from other cows denied or seen as an unpleasant disadvantage. Cows are sold off cheaply or inseminated with the sperm of more attractive breeds. Even where people do not deliberately try to eradicate the breed, the available bulls are in the most cases modern pure-, or to a high degree mix-breeds so that the offspring is guaranteed to diverge even more from its mother's origin.

To preserve this kind of cow, its unique characteristics and genetic features, individuals of all regions need to be identified and gathered, in order to establish the basis for an organized breeding. If the last mountain cows will be left to themselves, they will soon cease to exist.

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