

## An Old-timer and his coop...

It all began with a Brindle Great Dane. I might have been 10 yrs old at the time and I was coming back from school when a huge slobbery snout welcomed me in the stairway. I can't even remember whether it was a dog or a bitch. A monstrously big head and an orange and black body was standing on the stairway platform... and I almost peed my pants. That was my first ever encounter with a Great Dane. Back then Great Dane was a phenomenon, not just a dog. I couldn't help wondering that a dog could be orange. Now I know that orange Brindle is a rarity.

Then there was Oskar. He was a black Great Dane. He appeared on our block when I was 12 I guess. He strolled all over the place, scaring people away, but in fact he must have been a well-trained dog. I'm not sure if he was starving but when he showed up on our staircase my parents gave him a 50 cm long pork bone. He devoured it in 30 seconds. I'm not even sure whether his name was Oskar, I don't remember how this name came about but he responded to it really well. Oskar would walk me to the bus stop regularly for a few weeks. It didn't matter how early or how late it was- he would wait for me. It lasted for several weeks. Oskar enjoyed welcoming people with putting his front paws on their shoulders (now I know that Danes do it passionately), causing-I would think- problems with sphincter. I know because my father's friend got such a welcome once and couldn't believe he hadn't pooped his underwear. Nobody will find out that now. Oskar was with us a couple of weeks and then he disappeared. I am only guessing but he might have belonged to a local bar owner ('Bar pod Sosnami') where Anin's private initiative met in the 70's. Then there was no Great Dane in my life for many years. Of course they appeared in Polish movies like "Przygody Pana Michała", "Nie lubię poniedziałku", "Poszukiwany, poszukiwana" and "Mężczyzna z M-3" but it was merely a way to tease my vanity – to have my own dog. First there was the school, then – university. A Great Dane was always a pleasant thought but never a goal. And then I met my future wife, Beata, and the dream came back. She would talk about Great Danes at Nowogrodzka Street and we resolved we wanted to own one. Keeping our limited funds in mind, we went to the X-lecia Stadium in Warsaw. We saw 4 dog muzzles sticking out of a cardboard box – two greys (that's how we described them back then), one black and one Harlequin. I told Beata we should at least pick something original since there was no guarantee those puppies would look like Great Danes in the future. We bought a Merle bitch. We named her 'Buka', like the grey monster from 'Muminki'. With time she turned out to be the smartest of all our bitches- we raised her with our daughter Ola, and she was her best bodyguard. It happened a few times that Ola's friends wanted to hit Ola when they were playing together and growling Buka would appear by her side momentarily. She never hurt any of Ola's friends but she did bite me in the butt when she decided the tag could be harmful to Ola.

Then Franek appeared. Though the word 'appeared' doesn't do any justice to his coming into our lives. I simply went to a livestock market in Augustówka in Warsaw and bought a blue puppy of the famous Mruk.

Franek was a real dog. When he was a puppy he was attacked by a German shepherd

(at that time we lived in a flat and there must have been at least six dogs on our floor). Franek remembered that and when the appropriate moment came he reminded our neighbour who owned the floor. He had one outstanding asset, namely he could sense drunk citizens and growled at them so none of them ever dared to come close either to me or Beata. He also had a permanent enemy – a Rotweiller. Once, when he wrestled from my grip, he got hurt and didn't put his foot down anymore. Back in the day, we would walk our dogs without a leash or muzzle and we would let them do whatever they wanted. A few neighbours would get angry, one of them even threatened me he would call the police or beat the shit out of me but we had the impression that those people didn't know what they were talking about. Our dogs were very friendly. Now I know I mustn't let my Great Danes scamper around freely because some people are afraid of them, probably due to their size. Besides, you can't force anyone to think what you want them to think. From then on, whenever I take my dogs for a walk I make sure I remember that there are people who have no love for Great Danes and that most of them are scared of them.

Franek passed away after losing a battle with bone cancer in 2001. Buka got defeated by cirrhosis in 2002. Both dogs left with our blessing so to speak, and I sincerely hope that none of you will ever face the choice of when to let a dying dog go.

When it's finally over the thought that it might have been too early keeps haunting you. Those who don't believe me should read a story about love for dogs and their unavoidable death in the book called "Amazing Gracie".

In 2002 we purchased a piece of land with an unfinished house. Buka had a chance to set her foot on our future 'estate' before she passed away. We weren't sure whether we wanted another friend who would most probably die before us and whose passing we would witness again. But we hesitated only for a short time. In April 2002 we were joined by Ala (Al-Kahira Thidalium) who proved to be the best remedy for our sorrow. She's still with us today. Ala is a real lady, she's a leader in our group, although there are moments when her age catches up with her, still, she holds the rest in close check, even the youngest in our pack. Yes, it's a pack now. Danes form a pack when there is more than one of them. This pack either guards the household or hunts. This hunting part becomes a considerable problem whenever they spot a roe in the woods nearby. Ala was alone till fall 2002 when we got Frania whom we named after Franek and whose real name is Paprika Margarejro. It's not a move I recommend to you because Frania, together with the name, inherited his ADHD as well. In spite of her obedience she exists in her own world which evolves around two basic activities: eating soil and sneaking at our neighbours' dogs. She changes completely when there's food on the table. She then rests her head on a shoulder of the person sitting closest to the food and puts her "I'm starving" face on.

After Frania we were joined by Stefka or Stefanka. Our daughter calls her "Little Mohair" but that has nothing to do with her religious views. Stefanka is a yellow Great Dane with a black tan, her slobes are longer than the Nile and she comes from a famous kennel "Z Kuźni Napoleńskiej". Janek Gabrysiak, its co-owner, became my good friend, I hope. In his heart dogs occupied a special place and so do people have a special place in Stefanka's heart. Absolutely no aggression towards people. Moreover, she comes from a line of talking

Danes (after Maciejka) who can say 'mama' when you ask them to.

Now comes the time to introduce our firstborn puppy – A'la Italiana. An 'indigo' dog. I know what I'm capable of and I know my rights so kiss my ass. Together with her mother Ala they ruled over the rest of the pack. They tolerated each other and never quarelled but Italiana was the true boss. She was a spark in our pack. She passed away without an obvious reason but she managed to leave a litter. We kept Dumka na Dwa Serca, her daughter, with us. Italiana was our Pocahontas – she "ran like the wind" in the garden.

It was Italiana who introduced the habit of brain transfer to our family. For several minutes she could stand still in front of me with her forehead touching mine.

Sometimes I think the capacity of her brain was bigger than my own. "She came and then left" – this sentence encapsulates the whole of her 5-year-long life.

After Italiana was born, Al-Kahira had her second litter. It's a usual thing to have two yellow and two black Great Danes in a litter from a Harlequin bitch and a black male. One of the blacks, Mamba (officially known as Bajeczna Olcia) stayed with us. We know we've made the right choice. Mamba is an extraordinary dog. She'll always lick you and – being this big- she'll also knock you over. She doesn't SEE obstacles, she RAMS into them. Be it a table or a person, it makes no difference to her. Just like Oskar, she also welcomes you by jumping on your shoulders. A judge would say she is clumsy, she isn't particularly fond of trotting in the ring but she's an angel all the same.

And now there comes the time to introduce you to Asia. She's an unusual dog. She's Stefanka's daughter (officially called "Córka Stefanki") and she inherited her mother's best trait: she can talk which is mainly manifested by long 'Uuuu'). Asia is unprecedentedly devoted to me. We sow grass and chase frogs in the garden together. No other bitch follows me like she does. We carefully examine every spot where she had peed (for those of you who are not interested in gardening these are the places where grass dries out) and together we decide how to make it grow back. Asia, being an only child, is in one way different from the rest – she doesn't lick – we suspect that it can be the result of not having siblings in the litter. She is a true only child and it never occurred to us to sell her. Even now, as I am writing this, we are checking on the canelloni together.

Dumka na dwa Serca, among us also known as Dupa, is the youngest member of our pack. She was born in Italiana's litter and we're not going to give her away. You can all tell what Dupa looks like. She is supposed to be a Mantle but she is also an Harlequin. I am lost when it comes to all those genetic 'al's' and 'el's' so naturally I am the last person to determine who Dupa really is. She's our beloved little daughter (not a bit more and not a bit less than any other from the pack of course). She's helped me get rid of violence towards dogs. One day in winter she didn't want to come into the house. I got really pissed and went chasing her in the snow with my flip flops on. When I finally caught her, after losing my footwear in a 20-minute chase I wanted to give her a hiding. It all happened a few days after her mother Italiana passed away – at the last moment or perhaps a bit later because I had already grabbed her by the neck, I withdrew my hand thinking about myself and my own stupidity. Don't hit the dog, you moron, but explain why you wish it to come inside the house. From that

day she always comes to me when I call her. Today, in return, she wants to sit on my lap apparently forgetting that she weighs over 60 kilos. I think she'll follow in her mother's steps and become the pack leader one day.

From other dog owners I've learned that selling your puppies is like selling your own children. We all know that breeding should focus on improving the pedigree but conscience whispers in my ear that it is no more than selling family. Let us all make sure our 'children' don't end up in the hands of psychopats, gardening freaks or other people who shouldn't have anything to do with Great Danes. After all, Great Dane is a living creature.