



The short history of Hungarian sheep breeding and Hungarian merino breed

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to show the situation of Hungarian sheep breeding, and the evolution of Hungarian merino sheep breed from the starts to nowadays. In spite of the depreciation of wool, the Merino sheep stock has a 80% part of the whole Hungarian sheep flock. The sector produces mostly only one product for one foreign market. The main product is the exported lamb, also has shown a significant decrease last years, got mostly (90%) to Italy. As a result of the above-mentioned facts, the meat production of Merino sheep has come to the front last years. The rate of sold lambs per ewe (70%), the average daily weight gain of lambs (250 gr/day) are showing a low level of production. (Keywords: sheep, hungarian merino, Hungarian sheep breeding)

ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

Magyarország juhtenyésztése és a magyar merinó története

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A szerzők a magyar juhtenyésztés helyzetét, valamint a magyar merinó kialakulásának történetét mutatják be kezdetektől napjainkig. A hazai juhállományt, a gyapjú elértéktelenedésének ellenére is több mint 80%-ban még mindig a merinó fajtacsoportba tartozó egyedek alkotják. A juhágazat egytermékűvé és egypiacossá vált. Közülük legjelentősebb a 90%-ban exportra értékesített, jelentős csökkenést mutató vágóbárány, amelynek döntő hányada az EU-ba, Olaszországba kerül. A fent említett tényeknek köszönhető, hogy az utóbbi években a merinó hústermelése előtérbe került. Az árutermelő állományok alacsony termelési szintje, a 70%-os értékesített szaporulatban, valamint az alacsony, 250 g körüli napi súlygyarapodásban nyilvánul meg.

(Kulcsszavak: juh, magyar merinó, magyar juhtenyésztés)

INTRODUCTION

The land and climatic conditions of Hungary are particularly suitable for sheep farming. These circumstances have been inspiring and motivating the Hungarian breeders to raising and breeding sheep for ages. „The country had extended pastures, but due to the often droughts being mostly eligible only for sheep farming, because the sheep were the

only ones who were parading on the searing fields. This is the reason why our sheep stock was always so numerous, and after being taken up the imported Spanish Merino sheep, it became important, too” (Kovácsy, 1923).

Spain had been keeping the Merino sheep as a relevant economical possession for many years, on pain of death the exporting of these animals was forbidden. However, the importation of the breed started to the different countries, so the Merino got to nearly every European state as well as Sweden, France, Saxony, the Habsburg Empire and Prussia, etc. (Schandl, 1928).

Sheep husbandry from the Settlement of the Magyars (A.D. 896) till the first Merino exportations (A.D. 1760s) in Hungary

The settling Magyars brought a numerous sheep stock into their new home, moreover, the subdued nations also dealt with sheep farming. In the Carpathian-basin, because of the migration from west to east, lived a very diversified, especially east-originated sheep stock (Veress et al., 1982). Some theories say that the Racka breed (*Ovis aries strepsiceros Hortobágyiensis*) has been with the Magyars since their Settlement in Hungary.

After the foundation of the Hungarian state, the notability of the sheep farming was higher and higher, the commercialism with the sheep and its products were important. During the reign of Béla II the Blind (c. 1110–1141), King of Hungary (1131–1141), 761 tax-payer of 59 locality paid yearly 30 corpulent sheep as tax after their 1522 sheep. Commercialism of sheepskin has scored since 1255 (Kovácsy, 1923). During the reign of Árpád dynasty (c. 855–1301) the number of sheep population was raising. With the settling down of Vlach shepherds arrived the Valachian (or Curkana) and the Tsigai sheep, making use of mountain pastures (Veress et al., 1982).

In Ottoman Hungary, the number of sheep stock was raising again, because the muslims preferred mutton to beef or pork (Ortutay, 1977-1982). During the 150 years of fights, the agriculture retrograded, with the pastoral farming the sheep husbandry became more notable. (Veress et al., 1982). In this time, there were no significant changes in the Hungarian sheep stock, the prevailing breed was the Racka. After the Ottoman Empire, German immigrants were settled down to the depopulated territories, they brought into Hungary the Cikta sheep. In the second half of seventeenth century, Archbishop Szelepcsényi tried to improve the fiber diameter by importing Padova sheep from Italy, but it failed of success. In 1756, a decree was ratified to cull the rams with very strong and defective wool (Kovácsy, 1923).

Until 1760, the exporting of Merino sheep was forbidden on pain of death in Spain. The embargo did not apply to the Spanish king, so Philip V of Spain allowed Jonas Alströmer, opulent businessman and famous sheep breeder, to export a small Merino flock to Gothenburg, Sweden (Éber, 1961). This first exportation and the lifting of the embargo in 1760 resulted the following Merino-exports to all European countries and the evolution of local Merino Merino breeds (Éber, 1961).

In 1765, a short time after lifting of the embargo, the first Merino flock arrived Hungary by the decree of Maria Theresa of Austria, Holy Roman Empress, sovereign of Hungary. The flock was placed in Mercopail, near Fiume (presently Rijeka) (Rodiczky, 1880), and a course was held for shepherds as well (Éber, 1961).

Sheep husbandry from the first Merino importation (A.D. 1760s) till the end of World War I

The first imported flock was followed by others in 1773 and 1775. They were placed also in Mercopail, the distribution of the breeding stock started in 1775–1776 (Kovácsy, 1923).

The not typical Hungarian climate conditions of Mercopail were not so suitable for the Merinobreeding, for this reason Joseph II, Holy Roman Emperor, son of Maria Theresa, distributed the breeding stock all over the country (mostly Budaörs and West-Hungary) and closed the Mercopailer stock-farm in 1782 (*Veress et al.*, 1982).

The Hungarian farmers, as earlier the French ones, were unpleasant and felt antipathy towards the Merino sheep (*Éber*, 1961). On the other hand, Nagyváthy wrote in 1791: „the recently imported Spanish rams have conspicuously improved the quality of wool”.

Joseph II, as his mother, kept on the importation of Merinos from Spain, and what is more, he allowed to everybody to do the same. The high price of wool inspired the rich farmers as well (*Kovácsy*, 1923). In spite, the born-in-Hungary Merino rams could be cover in pure blood Merino flocks, they were mostly used to sublimate the original Hungarian sheep stock. „So one side of the ancestors of present Hungarian Merino stock is mostly the original Hungarian sheep breed, and the number of those flocks in which Merino always were mating only with Merino is very low” (*Kovácsy*, 1923).

The last Spanish import happened in 1802 by the famous sheep breeder Schubernigg, Prince Esterházy's shepherd inspector. He imported 500 rams and 1800 ewes from Countess Negretti's flock (*Éber*, 1961). In this time, the Esterházy-manor had 127 000 ewes, including about 20 000 Merino or Merino-like sheep (*Verres and Dunka*, 2003). In 1816, Prince Albert of Saxony, Duke of Teschen, imported Rambouillet sheep from France to his manor in Magyaróvár (presently Mosonmagyaróvár) (*Kovácsy*, 1923).

From the middle of the 1800s, Hungarian farmers could compete even harder with the cheaper overseas wool (*Veress et al.*, 1982). With the decrease of the wool's notability, the meat-purpose came to the front nearly all over in Europe, except in Hungary (*Veress et al.*, 1982).

The breeding of Hungarian Merino started in the end of the eighteenth century. Until the end of the twentieth century, the base of the breed, called Hungarian Combed Merino, was partly the Racka and the German domestic sheep (*Schandl*, 1947). After the end of nineteenth century, large body and longer fiber had significant importance in Hungarian sheep breeding using French Rambouillet and North-German Combed sheep breeds (*Kovácsy*, 1923). Because of the low wool prices, the Hungarian sheep sector was in a crisis in the 1860s. The less quantity sheared wool per sheep meant further problem. As a result of the developing of the intensive farming and the above-mentioned reasons, the sheep stocks were decreasing (*Kovácsy*, 1923) (*Figure 1*).

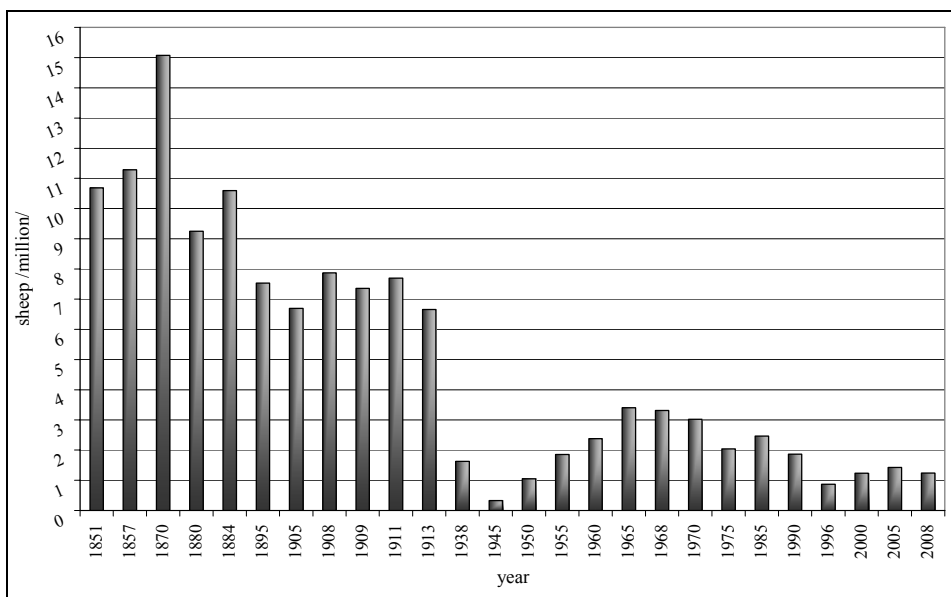
In Hungary, the first herd-book was opened in 5th January 1859 (*Gaál*, 1966). The registration of the different breeds started in 1869. In this time, the Merino or Merino-crossed sheep stock had a 31.5% part of the whole Hungarian sheep flock. The other breeds (Racka, Curkana, Tsigai, German domestic sheep) were described together as a „common” breed (*Éber*, 1961).

In 1899, the National Wool Classifying Institute were established, it was dealing with instrumental wool classifying, grading, estimation and consultation (*Veress et al.*, 1982). The farmers tried to compensate the low wool prices with larger body, quicker growth and higher wool production (*Kovácsy*, 1923). In some parts of Hungary, the selling of milk products also meant a solution for the problem (*Böő*, 2003).

In 1900, Hungary's sheep stock was about 7.5 million, half of this belonged to the Merino or Merino-crossed group. Until the World War I, with the continuous decreasing of the sheep number, the rate did not change. The upper-mentioned cheaper overseas wool pushed out the finer European products from the market. For this reason, the development of meat-purpose breeds has been started all over in Europe, except in Hungary (*Böő*, 2003).

Figure 1

Changing of Hungarian sheep stock on the territory of Hungary



Source (Forrás) Rácz, 1914; Németh et al., 1977; Rodiczky, 1904; Kukovics and Jávör, 2009

1. ábra A juhállomány alakulása Magyarország területén

Sheep husbandry from the end of World War I till the change of regime

After the World War I, as a beaten country Hungary was shorn of over 72% of the territory it had previously controlled, so a great part of the sheep stock, and the whole wool processing industry left outside Hungary. The Merino sheep became in the majority (Böő, 2003).

The milking became more and more popular, and for the continuous milk supply the Merinos were mated all year (Veress, 1982). Kovácsy (1923) grouped the sheep stock into 5 categories in Hungary:

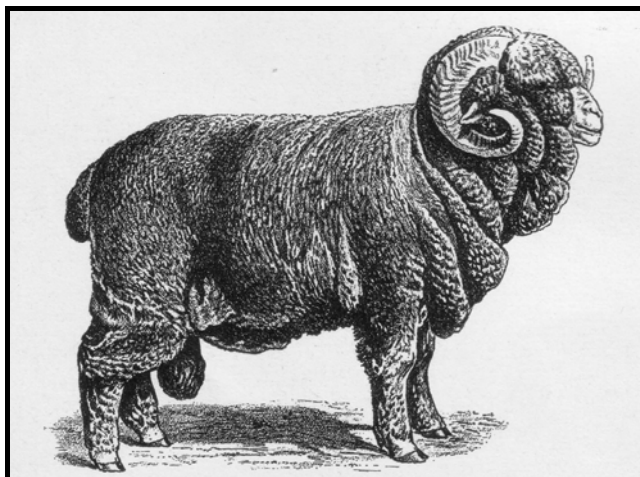
- Electoral: coming from Saxony to Hungary. Its most important breeding feature was the fineness of wool, but their resistant to diseases was very poor. Because of the decreasing of wool prices their number was reduced, finally the shepherds abandoned its breeding.
- Negretti (Figure 2): contrary to Electoral, the most important breeding feature was the quantity, but the wool was very fine, too. The imported animals from Count Negretti's flock meant the base of the Hungarian stock. The large body was preferred, but defects were appeared (unusable skin, heterogeneous wool).
- Escorial (Electoral-negretti): the crossing of the upper-mentioned variants. Its growth and weight was not suitable, so their number was reduced (Figure 3).
- Combed: the crossing of the long and rough wool breeds with Merino. As a result of crossing, the wool became finer and shorter, but the population was very heterogeneous. After the practical selection, and the usage of suitable breeding

animals, the stock became more homogeneous. In breeding of Combed Merino the Rambouille (*Figure 4*) and Merino Précoce breeds were used, too.

- Merino Précoce was called „meat purpose Merino” in Hungary, but it was used for wool producing. The Hungarian climate had no good effect to this variant. To improve the weight, the French Soissonais meat purpose Merino was more suitable.

Figure 2

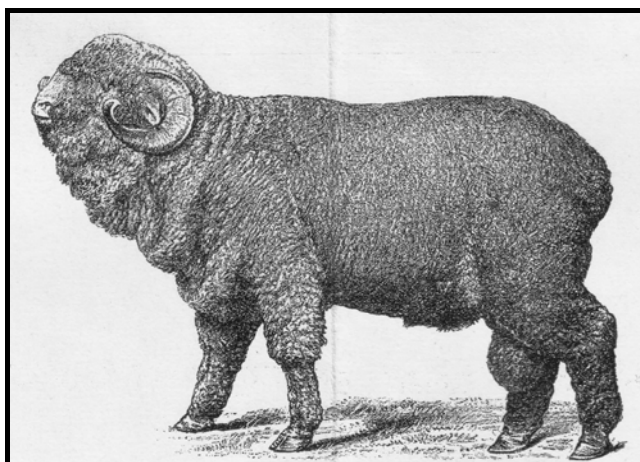
Negretti sheep



1. ábra: Negretti juh

Figure 3

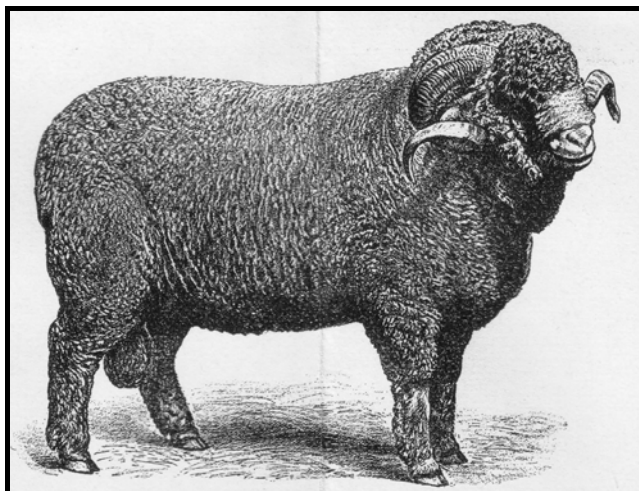
Electoral-negretti sheep



2. ábra: Electoral-negretti juh

Figure 4

Rambouille sheep



3. ábra: Francia fésűsmerinó juh

In the 1950–60s, to improve the production features of Hungarian Combed Merino the variants of Soviet Merino (Askanian Merino, Caucasian Merino, Stavropol Merino, Grozny Merino) were used. As a result of the crossings the greasy wool weight raised. The Caucasian Merino improved the technological features of the wool, increasing the staple length, the average raw wool yield and the rendement (clean wool yield) (*Vahid and Kóbori, 2002*). Some authors emphasized the effect of Askanian Merino to wool production and staple length (*Kósa et al., 1988*).

In the 1960s, to improve the meat production of Hungarian Merino stock, the using of French Merino (Merino Précoce) and German (GDR, FRG) Mutton Merino started. In the 1970–1980s there were some tryings to increase the production of Hungarian Combed Merino with Kent, Corriedale and Australian Merino as well. In this time, there were also tryings to improve the prolificacy with Booroola Merino (*Jávor and Fésűs, 2000*).

With the spreading of synthetic fibres and the decreasing of wool prices the Hungarian sheep stock regressed, the main product became the lamb from the 1960s (*Veress et al., 1982*). The milk and wool production were pushed into the background. (In 1965, Hungary produced 15 million litre of sheep milk, it decreased to 2 million in 1979.) (*Veress et al., 1982*).

In the 1980s, the developing of technology of fattening and milking, meat and milk production were observable, so the wool production was pushed into the background increasingly (*Madai and Ványai, 2002*). In spite of this, the construction of Hungarian breeds did not change, the productional stock was mostly composed of Hungarian Merino. The losses of the World War II were restored only in the 1980s, the Hungarian sheep stock reached the 3.2 million ewes. However, the change of regim (1989) involved a new situation and a general crisis in the agriculture, effecting the sheep husbandry, too (*Madai and Ványai, 2002*).

From the change of regim (1989) till these days

The Hungarian sheep stock has been decreasing since change of regime, it touched bottom in 1996. The construction of Hungarian breeds did not change, the Hungarian Merino is dominating. With changing the system of subventions, a temporary raising was noticeable, but the decreasing has been persistent since 2002. The number of ewes reduced fewer than 1 million at the end of 2007. The tendency has not changed, what is more, a further decreasing is possible as a consequence of initiating electronic identification from 2010.

The Merino sheep stock has a 80% part of the whole Hungarian sheep flock. The sector turned into defenceless, it produces mostly only one product for one foreign market. The main product is the exported lamb, also has shown a significant decrease last years (in 2007, the difference was 100.000 lambs), got mostly (90%) to Italy. The quality of the sold lambs is considerably heterogeneous, a great part of them expressly weak (*Kukovics and Molnár, 2008*). The becoming of one purpose meat sheep of Hungarian Merino is a negative result of the recent years. The rate of sold lambs per ewe (70%), the average daily weight gain of lambs (250 gr/day) are showing a low level of production (*Jávor, 2005a*).

According to a paper studying the present and the future of Hungarian Merino stock, the determining breed in Hungary is in an exasperating situation: decreasing ewe and exported lamb rate, low sold lamb rate, the number of pedigree ewes and rams are also under the critical level (*Kukovics és Molnár, 2008*). The Hungarian sheep husbandry still has reserves. In order to develop the quality and quantity it is necessary to use crossings. The Hungarian Merino has adapted exceedingly to the Hungarian technological, keeping and feeding conditions, for this reason the ewes give an ideal basis to any crossings.

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