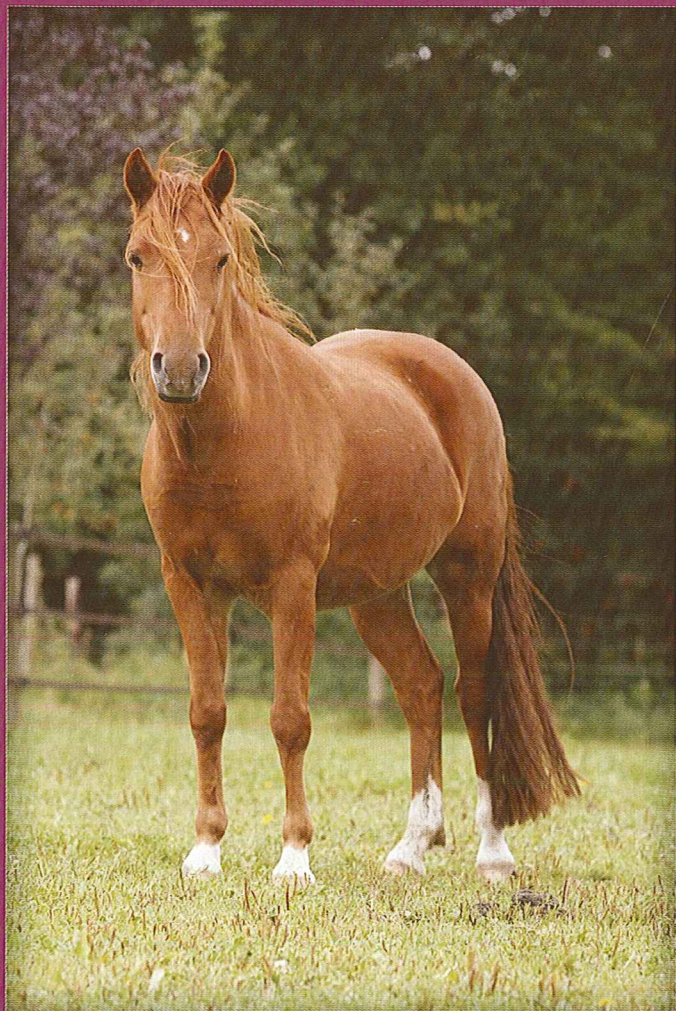


A Caspian Horse Story

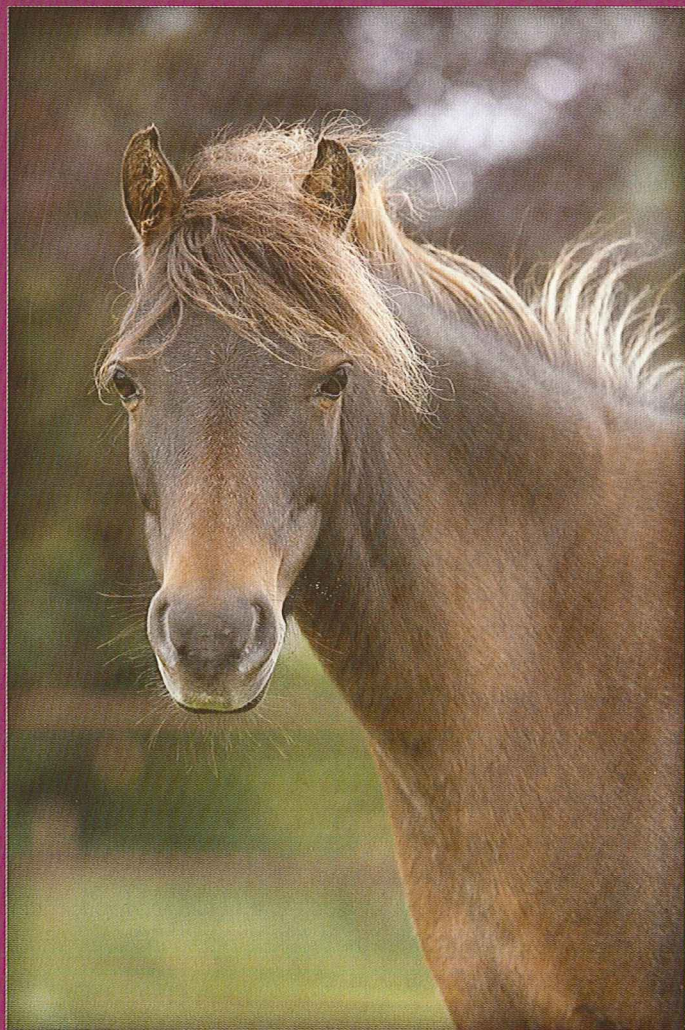
- Part One: Nanda's own Valiant Ambition NOVA

Words by Brigitte Kilian De Wolff - Photography by Erwin de Wolff



met and conversed with Nanda Le Poole-Smith, breeder of Caspians and other miniature horses, in the village of Eext. Eext means 'oak' in Dutch and there are a great many Oak trees in the village and surrounding area. During the long train journey, Saskia told us the history of the Caspian breed. In her professional life, Saskia is a dedicated teacher and in private she is a great storyteller!

In 1965 an American lady named Louise Firouz was looking for good riding horses for her small children. Louise had married an Iranian, Narcy Firouz, and together they lived in his homeland. She established a decent equestrian centre, but it was not easy to find



During an equine assisted coaching session, my good friend and godmother to my children, Saskia Klaassen, expressed a desire to find a Caspian horse for my daughter Emma. She had shared this wish with me even before our beloved Arabian Samira passed away, but at that time I was too occupied with my mare's soundness problems to really give it much consideration.

Samira passed away in October 2010 and we endured a long winter of shared grief. We were all supportive of one another, but went through the stages of mourning in our own way. Saskia wrote a wonderful poem about our loss and I spent several hours looking through our precious collection of photographs. My dear husband had taken hundreds of shots of Samira over the years and I shared some moments of heartache with my daughter. The loss of a pet, particularly a wonderful horse like Samira, has quite an impact on your life; an impact I had largely underestimated.

So, one beautiful sunny day, Saskia, Emma and I set off to the north to visit a farm full of rare Caspian horses. In the months prior, Saskia had

riding horses suited to the children. The Turkoman horses were mostly inconvenient because of their height and the Mongolian ponies were typically too wild to train as a child's pony. One particular day Louise heard about small horses in the area around the Caspian Sea; the local farmers called them Mouleki or Pouseki, meaning 'small muzzle'.



Curious, Louise and a friend set off on her quest to meet these small muzzled horses. Eventually she found three: Ostad, Aseman and Alamara. They did not look like typical ponies at all, but rather more like a small version of the pure-bred Arabian.

The owners were very poor and the horses were malnourished and not very well cared for. Louise succeeded in buying twenty-seven of the horses and bred thirty-two more out of her foundation group. In a period of just ten years she created her own breed and called it the Caspian horse, for obvious reasons.

The little horses turned out to be very good riding ponies for children, being comfortable due to their excellent movement and possessing great jumping abilities. They had a perfect disposition to be handled by youngsters and were a very nice size, typically around 1.12m, or 11hh to 12hh. They excelled at trail riding due to their hardiness and true riding horse gaits.

Wisely, Louise succeeded in breeding and collecting many more generations of the little horses and exported them to the USA and Bermuda, where the friend that accompanied her on that first quest

Kingdom, and several more followed.

The political situation in Iran changed dramatically and, during the last years of the Shah's regime, Louise was forced to donate horses and her equestrian centre to the Royal Horse Society of Iran. Nevertheless, she managed to find twenty-seven new horses in the period 1974-8 and bred fourteen more. She also exported as many as she could before it became forbidden to keep horses privately and she was deprived of her passion.

The Iran-Iraq war subsequently affected the numbers of the Caspian breed and the Iranian Asil, but later, Louise's daughter Roshan continued her mother's work. Now there are less than 1,000 Caspian horses worldwide and they are vulnerable to the possible effects of inbreeding. Outside Iran, the twenty-six initial exports formed the foundation of the breed and so today's breeding programmes require a great deal of thought and planning. The breed needs to be preserved, largely as it is thought to have already existed in the ancient Persian kingdom of Darius, in 500 BC, as a combat chariot horse.



Genetic research has shown the Caspian horse to be an ancestor of both the Arabian and Akhal-Teke horses. All three breeds descend from the same ancestors, but the Caspian was first to separate from the group, maintaining some ancient traits. One such ancient characteristic is the longer forehead bone, that later became the foundation of the jibbah in the Arabian breed. Another very remarkable characteristic is that the Caspian horse can possess the dorsal stripe and zebra striping to the legs without carrying the dun factor. Other shared features are

now resided. She suspected that her discovery could in fact already be a rare and forgotten old breed and thus she founded a studbook.

In 1971, the Shah of Iran celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. Worldwide royalty were invited and among them were Prince Philip and Princess Anne, both passionate horse lovers. During their stay in Iran they were invited to ride the Shah's most beautiful horses. Nancy Firouz and his daughter joined them on their Caspian horses. Prince Philip and Princess Anne were very impressed by the charm and abilities of the two small Caspians as they kept up with the bigger horses through rough terrain with quiet ease. Two Caspian horses were gifted to the Prince, such was his interest in the breed. These two, a pregnant mare and a stallion, were the first imports to the United

the curled ears and under muscle frequently seen in Arabians and Akhal-Tekes.

Originally mountain horses, Caspians tend to be cow hocked. Their tail set is not as flagged as Arabians, but they do carry their tails in the same manner, and more so than other breeds.

As our narrator ended her story, we arrived at Eext, stepped off the train and went to find a taxi. Emma, Saskia and I were looking forward to a girls' only weekend, and were eager to meet the most influential breeder in Holland: Nanda Le Poole-Smith of NOVA stables. It was the beginning of a very new adventure to discover an ancient breed of small but noble horses.

Read more of our adventure in part two, in the next edition of *The Arabian Magazine*. ♦