



Above: Birthplace of Heinrich Essig, Grabenstrasse 4 in Leonberg (the building on the left).  
Below: Heinrich Essig. At his feet lies a dog resembling a Newfoundland.

## PART 6:

# Heinrich Essig and the Leonberger

Most dog breeds were developed after hundreds of years of evolution and lengthy selection by breeders. However, some breeds owe their existence to just one person.

The 19th century seems to have been a productive time for new dog breeds. In England, Parson Jack Russell and James Hinks were breeding the Jack Russell Terrier and modern Bull Terrier. In Sweden, Per Schiller and A.P. Hamilton created two types of Stövares, and in Germany, Eduard Karel Korthals and Louis Dobermann became the founding fathers of the Wire-haired Pointing Griffon and Doberman Pinscher.

These men knew exactly why they wanted their specific breeds. James Hinks was looking for a strong



and handsome show terrier; Jack Russell wanted a small terrier that could follow him fox hunting; Schiller, Hamilton and Korthals needed good hunting dogs; and Dobermann wanted to create a brave guard dog.

Heinrich Essig was an ambitious man and his reason for creating a new breed was quite odd. He envisioned a “lion-like dog” that would be linked forever to its hometown Leonberg, in southern Germany. Why? The city’s coat of arms shows a black, three-tailed lion on a field of gold. Heinrich Essig’s new breed had to resemble a lion.

## A GREAT DOG FANCIER

The city of Leonberg, in the German province of Baden-Württemberg, not far from Stuttgart, has about 46,000 inhabitants, but in Heinrich Essig's time it was a very small country town with only 2,000 people. In 1815, 39 states formed the so-called German Federation, a motley collection of principalities and grand duchies, but when Essig was born in 1808, King Frederick I was ruling the kingdom of Württemberg.

We don't know much about Heinrich Essig's childhood, but do know that he was born at Grabenstrasse 4 in Leonberg. The well-known German dog writer Dr. Hans Räber wrote that Essig was known in his hometown as a great dog fancier and because of that, people jokingly called him "Little Hagenbeck," referring to the famous Hagenbeck zoo and circus in Hamburg. Essig kept a collection of animals in his *Schweizerhausgarten* – dogs, chickens, geese, ducks, doves, deer, turkeys and even foxes.

Being a councillor in a small town with only 2,000 people wasn't a busy way of life. Like his contemporary Louis Dobermann, Essig found a second job: breeding and selling dogs – about 300 a year! In those days, big, heavy, impressive dogs were in demand and Essig became very successful. Buyers came from all over the

world and were very satisfied with his dogs; his competitors, however, weren't impressed and put him in a poor light.

## LEONHARDINER

Nineteenth-century Europe had plenty of types of dogs that Essig could use for his 'lion-like' breed. It is known that around 1625, the princely family Von Metternich, also living in the area, was breeding large, short- and long-haired dogs resembling the present Leonberger. These dogs had short muzzles and pendulous ears and worked on farms as guard, draft or herding dogs. These types formed the basis of the Swiss Mountain dogs, the Pyrenean Mountain Dog, the Kuvasz in the Danube area and the Owczareks in eastern Europe.

Tradition has it that Essig crossed a black-and-white Newfoundland Dog with a long-haired St. Bernard. The resulting black-and-white dogs were the size of the St. Bernard. Then Essig travelled to the monastery L'Hospice in the Swiss Alps, where *Bernardinerhunde* were bred. By the 1830s, the monks were crossing their monastery dogs – until then short-haired – with Newfoundland Dogs to get longer coats. However, the long coats turned out to be impractical in the snow and long-haired *Bernardinerhunde* puppies were given away. During the same period, Heinrich Essig and the prior traded two "Leonbergers" (still crossbreds) for two male St. Bernards.

The Swiss breeders at the monastery kept a close eye on Essig, fearing competition. There was even a saying that "*Was man nicht definieren kann, das sieht man gut als Leonberger an.*" ("If you can't identify the breed, you may call it a Leonberger.") Because of the crossings with St. Bernards, Essig's dogs acquired the nickname "*Leonhardiner.*"

Essig's antagonists weren't entirely wrong, of course. Even in those days it seemed odd to construct a breed to resemble a lion. Heinrich Essig, however, was a getter. After about four generations he added the Pyrenean Mountain Dog to his breed. They were responsible for the silver-grey coat colour, which was very popular at that time.

The breed's name was recorded for the first time in



The ideal type of Leonberger, drawn in 1895 by Albert Kull, who also wrote the first breed standard.

1846, the year that's considered the Leonberger's date of birth. Essig's critics asserted that he named his big, long-haired dogs Leonbergers – a brand name – because then he could sell them for higher prices.

In 1865 and 1870, the papers wrote about Essig and his dogs, called Leonbergers and Gotthard Dogs. (St. Gotthard is a mountain range in the Alps.)

## ST. BERNARD-LEONBERGER-ALPENHUND

By the 1850s, the Leonberger was a large white dog with a black head. The yellowish coat colour and dark mask were introduced later. In the 1860s, Essig's dogs were entered at a show in Munich, probably held during Oktoberfest. The papers wrote: "The best of these dogs were yellow-brown with shades of black, somewhat like a lion. Their beautiful outline also resembles that of a lion." This description was very complimentary for Essig. The catalogue for a show in Hamburg in 1876 listed 41 St. Bernard dogs; 12 of them were entered as Leonbergers and one as "Mountain Dog."

In 1912, the Dutch dog fancier L. Seegers wrote in his book *Hondenrassen (Dog Breeds)*: "The leading man in breeding Leonbergers was a certain Mr. Esser [sic] from the city of Leonberg. At the Nimrod Show in 1879, he entered some examples of his breed as well as other dogs in his possession."

Not everyone approved of the Newfoundland-St. Bernard-Pyreanean Mountain Dog crosses. At the 1880 show in Magdenburg (Germany), the judge complained that the five or six dogs entered by Essig were of five or six different types and his conclusion was, "I just can't understand that Mr. Essig, looking at all those 'delicious things,' is not off the track in his own 'breed.'"

There were other opinions. In 1880, Heering wrote in *Galerie Edler Hunde Racen (Gallery of Dog Breeds)*: "Apart from the Newfoundlands, their closest relatives anyway, the Leonbergers of Mr. Essig were the biggest and most impressive dogs among the ones with a long coat."

In his *Rassen des Hundes (Dog Breeds)*, published in 1895, the German dog writer Ludwig Beckmann ignored the new German breed. Beckmann can't have



Engraving by Specht, showing Heinrich Essig's garden with chickens, roe-deer and dogs. The woman holding the puppy could be Essig's wife, Marie.



'Marco,' painted by Paul Mahler. This male, owned by M.C. Gouté, was considered an excellent example of the breed at the end of the 19th century.



A pre-1904 photograph of 'Nero,' a Leonberger owned by C. Burger of Leonberg.

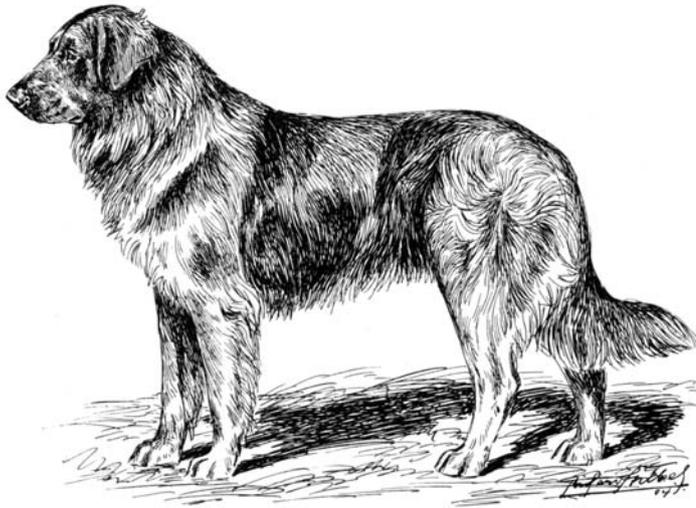


Illustration of a Leonberger by German dog fancier and writer Richard Strebel for his book *Die Deutsche Hunde* (1904).



The impressive head of today's Leonberger. The coat colour and the mane on neck and chest are lion-like, as Essig wished.

missed the creation of the Leonberger, but he preferred not to mention it.

In 1905, dog authority Richard Strebel wrote, "I won't deny that I have seen very nice Leonbergers already, but there is no uniformity in type and the breed itself is far from original. But, if the fanciers of this breed can manage pure breeding, in other words succeed in creating a new breed with more fanciers, I will be happy." Strebel included the breed standard in his book *Die Deutsche Hunde* as well as a handsome portrait of a Leonberger (see illustration at left).

## PROMINENCE

The difference between a Leonberger and a St. Bernard was quite vague in the 19th century. In 1853 and 1857, for example, two white-and-yellow spotted dogs from Essig's line travelled to the hospices of St. Bernard and St. Gotthard in Switzerland and could appear at shows as St. Bernards, Leonbergers or just *Alpenhunde* (dogs from the Alps).

However, the Leonberger gradually entered the official dog scene, especially after a number of prominent people acquired the breed. Grand Duke Friedrich von Baden owned a Leonberger, as did the composer Richard Wagner and Chancellor Von Bismarck. Empress Elisabeth of Austria – the world-famous Sissi – owned about seven Leonbergers: "*Blendend silberweiss mit braunen Gehängen.*" ("Shining silver-white with brown ears.") It is said that she paid 1,400 *Goldtaylor* for one dog, a considerable amount of money. The Austrian papers wrote about her dogs and that one of them accompanied his mistress every day during her ride in the Prater of Vienna.

Napoleon III, King Edward VII of Great Britain, King Umberto of Italy and the Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi also owned Leonbergers. In 1894, 374 Leonbergers were exported to Russia and at the end of the 19th century the breed was at the Russian imperial court.

By the 1870s, the Leonberger was in vogue and had become a status symbol. In November 1862, the local paper *Schwäbische Merkur* reported, "...dass diese grosse langhaarige Hunde ein Luxusartikel geworden

ist... durch die angeborene Gutmütigkeit besonders bei Damen beliebt" ("... these big, long-haired dogs have become a luxury... and because of their inbred good nature, they are especially loved by the ladies").

## POPULARITY AND SETBACKS

In a letter dated 1887, Essig wrote to fellow dog trader Seyfahrt from Köstritz: "The dogs I have been breeding since 1846 are successful crossings between a Newfoundland and the original dog of the St. Bernard Mountains. Since then I crossed and improved these crosses thanks to big wolf dogs from the Pyrenean – the birthplace of the St. Bernard. It is the biggest long-haired breed and apart from the size of the dogs, they combine intelligence and beauty."

Essig had a talent for public relations; he advertised in German dog magazines and some of his dogs were painted by such well-known artists as Krull, Specht, Leutemann and Beckmann. He made sure these pictures were well distributed in Germany and abroad. Unfortunately, his talent for writing a breed description or keeping a stud book was less developed.

Heinrich Essig died in 1889 and the breed immediately faced problems and setbacks. J. Schön wrote in 1905: "Without any doubt the Leonberger is a representative of the oldest stock of big, long-haired dogs. Only the fact that no precise breed standard existed and, as a consequence, every dog that could not be identified was seen as a Leonberger, is to blame that the prestige of these dogs has been harmed. Unreliable traders, who benefited from selling their dogs as St. Bernards, Mountain Dogs, Alpdogs or Newfoundlands have contributed to the situation."

Seegers wrote somewhat bitterly in 1912: "It seemed that some money could be earned, because the Leonberger gentlemen did not give up their breed; on the contrary, by judicious breeding they tried hard to keep a breed that passed their qualities to future generations."

## RECOGNITION

Breed clubs had existed in various German cities since 1891 and six years after Essig's death, the first *Internationale*

*Klub für Leonberger-Hunde* was established in Stuttgart.

The club gave the breed new impetus and a standard was written by the chairman, Albert Kull. The breed was recognized and the club had 75 members. The standard was revised in 1901 and the yellow-red coat colour underlined. Unfortunately, the result of this revision was a reduction of the gene pool. In 1922, the *Leonberger-Hundezuchtgenossenschaft* opened the first valid studbook.

Both World Wars had a dramatic effect on the breed – only five litters with 43 puppies were entered in the stud book in 1945 – but after WW II, the breed flourished and Leonbergers were sold all over Europe and the U.S. The FCI recognized the breed in 1955.

Over the years, the Leonberger changed from farm dog, guard dog and draft dog into show dog and family pet. The coat colour remained under discussion; Essig's first dogs were white with black and yellow spots and a little later, silver-grey became very popular.

It's not known when these colours were overtaken by lion yellow. The present FCI breed standard states: "Lion yellow, red, reddish brown, also sandy (pale yellow, cream coloured) and all combinations in between, always with a black mask." Heinrich Essig would be delighted that the word "lion" was included in the official standard.

The city of Leonberg still honours its famous son; his name and merits are mentioned on the official web site, and there is a Heinrich-Essig-Strasse. At the Bürgerplatz, a beautiful bronze statue was dedicated to Essig in September 2006.

However, not everyone credits Essig with being the creator of the Leonberger. A theory persists that the present Leonberger is a direct descendant of the so-called *Alpenhund*, living for centuries in the Graubündner Alps and now extinct.

According to the same theory, the city of Leonberg owes its name to these lion-like dogs, bought and sold on the dog and horse market. No one, however, denies that Heinrich Essig was one of the sellers and buyers on the market! ●