

Return from freedom – the story of the European bison M817 POPAS from Białowieża

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Abstract: The first European bison born in the breeding enclosure were released in 1952 to the Białowieża Forest. Two one-year-old bulls – 817 POPAS and 816 POMRUK were released into an 80-hectare enclosure to test whether they could obtain food on their own. The bull POMRUK was captured after two years but the bull POPAS remained in the Białowieża Forest for almost five years. He was brought to the Poznań Zoo and alone was kept in a small enclosure in the complex of hollow-horned mammals, instead of the larger enclosure dedicated to European bison. The Poznań Zoo waited a long time for the next purebred European bison and received only hybrids. In 1932 arrived KOBOLD, and in May 1945 the bull BUE with steppe cattle or American bison blood. The next purebred European bison was 1210 PUŁOM born in Pszczyna in 1959. His complete skeleton with the skull is now in the didactic collections of the University of Life Sciences in Poznań.

Keywords: reintroduction, European bison, Poznan ZOO

The first European bison born in captivity were released into the wild on September 13, 1952 – in the Białowieża Forest, where the species had become extinct in the wild in 1919. It was the world's first attempt to release an extinct species, which had been protected since the time of the Jagiellons, into the wild. In May 1952, two one-year-old bulls – 817 POPAS and 816 POMRUK (Fig. 1, 2) – were released into an 80-hectare enclosure to test their ability to forage on their own (Kraśnińska and Kraśniński 2017). After being released into the forest, the bull POMRUK was captured on August 15, 1955 due to his aggressiveness. In the meantime, the bull POPAS (born on May 25, 1951 – father 229 PLISCH and mother 715 POŻOGA – daughter of PLISCH) remained in the Białowieża Forest for almost five years. In April 1957, it was captured from the wild into a breeding reserve for reasons that have not yet been clarified. It is likely (Bolbot 2024, pers. comm.) that he was infertile – although he was the only bull in the free-ranging herd, not a single calf was born after him. This is confirmed by the summary of new births and the European bison present in the wild at the time: bull 897 PODAREK (born May 16, 1953), who was released into the wild together with mother 735 POJATA, was captured on November 27, 1956 and did not mate any of the cows. At this time, POPAS,



Fig. 1, Fig. 2 – The one-year-old European bison bulls POPAS and POMRUK were the first representatives of a species that had become extinct in the wild to be reintroduced to the Białowieża Forest (photo: Dr. Zbigniew Krasiński)



Fig. 3 – The POPAS bull in the Poznań ZOO in 1958/1959 (photo: Dr. Erna Mohr, EBPB archive, Białowieża)

POJATA and 910 POGODNA remained in the wild. When POPAS was captured in April 1957, his place was taken by 762 POLEL, who was released on April 29, 1957, together with females 812 POREBA and 940 POŁUDNICA. A year later (in April 1958), another large group of European bison was released, including several males. In May 1958, POJATA and POGODNA gave birth to calves (bulls) whose father was POLEL (Bolbot 2024, pers. comm.).

According to official documents, POPAS was transferred to the Poznań Zoo on September 14, 1957 (Fig. 3), although in his famous book “Animals from my sketchbook” (Nasza Księgarnia, 1960), Professor Jan Sokołowski had already drawn its silhouette in pencil from the left profile and its head from the front and side on August 23, 1957 (caption below the drawing). The discrepancy between these dates is surprising. POPAS was housed as a lone bull in a small enclosure in the complex of hollow-horned mammals, instead of in the spacious enclosure on the left, which was then occupied by a herd of American bison (Fig. 4). Previously, it was intended for wisents – it housed the famous pair brought in 1924 – the lowland cow GATCZYNA and the bull HAGEN, born to a Caucasian father (100 KAUKASUS), who were transferred to Białowieża on June 27, 1931 (Fig. 5), and who, due to their age (about 20 years old), did not participate in the restitution of this species in Białowieża (Fig. 6). Poznań Zoo waited a long time for the next purebred European bison



Fig. 4 – Since 1941, special enclosures for the European bison were set up at Poznań Zoo, as this species was unique in the collections of zoological gardens at that time (source: CYRYL archive)



Fig. 5 – The famous European bison pair (GATCZYNA and HAGEN) before transportation from Poznań under the watchful eye of the zoo director Kazimierz Szczerkowski (source: NAC archive)



Fig. 6 – The bull HAGEN in Białowieża in July 1933, shortly before his death due to old age (photo: Dr. Erna Mohr, MiZ Archive, Warsaw)

and received hybrids rejected from the restitution herd: on April 15, 1932, it received the bull KOBOLD (born on May 8, 1927) with an admixture of steppe cattle blood (Fig. 7) by decision of the State Forests Administration), and after the end of the Second World War, only the bull BUE (born on May 12, 1943, sire MILIS, a cross between American and European bison, dam POLANA) (Fig. 8) and the bull FAUN (a crossbreed born in May 1945) arrived as a gift from the Ministry of Forestry on September 19, 1946. For this reason, the bull POPAS, who had pure Białowieska blood, was given special care and even ridden by Alojzy Łuczak, an animal keeper, at Poznań Zoo (Fig. 9). This European bison remained there until his death (December 1, 1964) and reached an age of over 13 years (while wisent can live to be over 20 years old). His successor in the same enclosure (between domestic buffalo and zebu) was the bull 1210 PUŁOM from the Lowland-Caucasian line (born in 1959 in Pszczyna, father 761 PUMEKS, mother 723 PUŁOMKA), who died in 1973 as the last European bison exhibited in the Old Zoo in Poznań. Today, its complete skeleton, together with the skull, is kept in the didactic collections of the Department of Animal Anatomy of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Sciences of the University of Life Sciences in Poznań (Fig. 10, 11). The POPAS bull did not belong to the founding group of the Białowieska population in the wild, as the first calf was born there only in 1957, after a cow impregnated in the reserve (Kraśnińska and Kraśniński 2017).

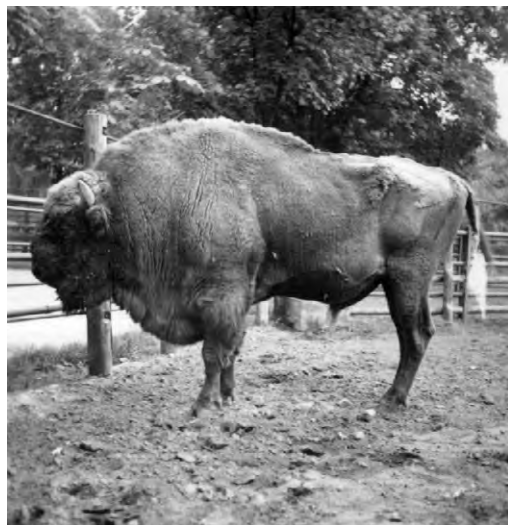


Fig. 7 – The bull KOBOLD, a hybrid, was an impressive individual that occupied a spacious enclosure in the Poznań Zoo after a breeding pair of European bison (photo: Dr. Erna Mohr, 4.IX.1937, EBPB Archive, Białowieża)



Fig. 8 – The BUE bull, a hybrid, in Białowieża, with the male of European bison PUGNAŁ (photo: Dr. Adolf Rzańnicki, 13.VII.1946, MiIZ Archive, Warsaw)



Fig. 9 – The POPAS bull was kept in a small enclosure fenced with metal pipes, where the bull could be saddled up by the animal keeper Ałojzy Łuczak (archive of Jan Śmiełowski)

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Photographs come from the NAC resources and the CYRYL website of the Posnania Municipal Publishing House in Poznań and from the archives – the European Bison Pedigree Book, the Museum and Institute of Zoology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and from the author's archive.

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Fig. 10, Fig. 11 – The skeleton of PULOŃ and a unique specimen of its stomach in the Department of Animal Anatomy of the University of Life Sciences in Poznań, contributed by the eminent archaeozoologist Prof. Dr. hab. Marian Sobociński (photo: Jan Śmiełowski)

Powrót z wolności – historia jednego żubra 817 POPAS z Białowieży

Streszczenie: Pierwsze żubry urodzone w zagrodzie hodowlanej zostały wypuszczone w 1952 roku do Puszczy Białowieskiej. Dwa roczne byki – 817 POPAS i 816 POMRUK zostały wsiedlone do 80-hektarowej zagrody, aby sprawdzić, czy potrafią samodzielnie zdobywać pożywienie. Byk POMRUK został odłowiony po dwóch latach, ale byk POPAS pozostał w Puszczy Białowieskiej przez prawie pięć lat. Został przywieziony do poznańskiego zoo i samotnie przetrzymywany był w małym wybiegu w kompleksie ssaków pustorogich, zamiast w większym wybiegu przeznaczonym dla żubrów. Poznańskie zoo długo czekało na kolejnego czystej krwi żubra i otrzymywało tylko mieszańce. W 1932 roku przybył KOBOLD, a w maju 1945 roku byk BUE z domieszką bydła stepowego lub bizona amerykańskiego. Następnym czystym żubrem był 1210 PUŁOM urodzony w Pszczynie w 1959 roku. Jego kompletny szkielet wraz z czaszką znajduje się obecnie w zbiorach dydaktycznych Uniwersytetu Przyrodniczego w Poznaniu.
