



Speech by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of the
1999 World Championships for Icelandic horses
Germany
August 6th 1999

Heiðruðu mótsgestir
Sehr verehrte Gäste
Ladies and Gentlemen

Íslenski hesturinn hefur löngum – reyndar allt frá landnámi – verið í senn gæðingur og þarfur þjónn íbúa hinnar harðbýlu eyjar í útnorðri. Hann hefur fylgt okkur – áum okkar og ættmennum – hvert á land sem við fórum, yfir fjöll og fallvötn, grasbala og harða mela.

Nun hat das Zusammenleben zwischen Pferd und Nation eine neue Gestalt angenommen. Jetzt sind wir dabei, das Pferd über das weite Meer und die Kointinente zu begleiten, um teilzunehmen an einem Fest, das von unseren Freunden und Verwandten in Europa gefeiert wird, um das Islandpferd, dieses für seine besonderen Eigenschaften und Fähigkeiten weltweit hochgeschätzte Tier, zu ehren.

I chose to begin with a few words in the language of my forebears, since it would hardly seem appropriate to open the 1999 World Championships for Icelandic horses without allowing these fine animals – which have been brought here from the moors of north Iceland, the plains of the south and the fjords of the east and west – to hear the noble and resonant language that has been fondly whispered in their ears ever since the Vikings transported this pedigree stock across the ocean.

The Icelandic horse has always lovingly repaid the affection shown to it, so I also felt obliged to say a few words of greeting in the language

of Goethe and Schiller to our hosts here in Germany who have organized an impressive world tournament, a festival where lovers of the Icelandic horse with their families and friends can gather to honour the champion among the horses of the world, unique in its qualities and skills.

It is both an honour and a pleasure for me to attend the 1999 World Championships and thereby show the gratitude that the Icelandic people feel towards our horses, which ever since our country was settled eleven hundred years ago have been at once our proud possessions and faithful servants, and also to thank you who have created a new home for the Icelandic horse in other countries, thank you who admire and love it and show with your devotion and care that you prize it as a unique treasure from our harsh but beautiful island in the north.

The Icelandic horse has been my nation's faithful companion for a thousand years, once indispensable to farmers and travellers for crossing difficult terrain, but now a popular form of leisure both in Iceland and abroad. For centuries this bold, versatile and hardy breed has prompted folk poets to sing its praises and been the inspiration for classic verse and beautiful works of art.

The Icelandic horse is linked to Icelandic nature by inviolable bonds. We all cherish memories of richly coloured flocks that glide along the grassy banks of glacial rivers, of seeing travellers on horseback in the distance with a spare horse in rein, of a caravan of horses threading its way along a cliff top with white waves below.

The Icelandic horse has been a true blessing in the fantastic adventure of our island nation. It is not only an ideal companion for adults who want to replenish themselves at the end of a hard day's work with an exhilarating ride through beautiful countryside. It is also one of the best helpers in any child's upbringing, a faithful friend in times of temptations, defending young people with healthy pleasures which will stand them in good stead for the whole of their lifetimes.

I still vividly recall a riding trip which I made with my father at the age of 13, when the two of us spent more than a week by ourselves on horseback, riding through the valleys and moors of Borgarfjörður in west Iceland – my initiation into manhood in the bosom of Icelandic nature, when my father, a great horseman, bestowed upon his son the knowledge accumulated for centuries by successive generations about the qualities and character of the Icelandic horse. My father had long been one of those intrepid horsemen in the West Fjords who did not flinch at riding

over the mountains and remote wilderness, braving rough terrain and natural obstacles, the way resolute farmers and fishermen had done for centuries. And on our trip through Borgarfjörður I managed to gain a glimpse of that experience.

You who are gathered here today have formed a close affection for the horse, and I am deeply moved to see how you show it profound respect and fondness. Numerous admirers around the world have created splendid international festivals in its honour, celebrations which the Icelandic people appreciate most of all.

We have come here together to launch these splendid 1999 World Championships for Icelandic horses and also to look forward to the year 2000 when Reykjavík will host a grand national festival staged in the magnificent nature of Iceland's capital. There, thousands of horses will display their much-prized gaits on the capital's riding tracks, in what is planned to be a unique and historic event. Along with a wide range of live shows, it will pay tribute to the peaceful cohabitation of the urban and natural environments.

The 1999 World Championships for Icelandic horses are an homage, a European tribute, a grand finale in a century which has seen the Icelandic horse travel farther afield across the continents than ever before.

I convey to our hosts our heartfelt gratitude for their ambitious feat of organization and impressive programme, and wish you all an enjoyable and unforgettable time.

This will indeed be a unique occasion, blessed with the joy which has always reigned wherever man and horse parade forth together.

It is both an honour and a pleasure to open the 1999 World Championships for Icelandic horses and bring you greetings and gratitude from the people of Iceland.