

Lotte Hass

A Pictorial Biography

By Michael Jung

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If you read the books about the history of self-contained diving, you will see the name of the diving pioneer Hans Hass mentioned very often. And rightfully so. However, the name of his wife, Lotte, who was also a pioneer in the field, is seldom mentioned. History shows that Lotte was one of the very first female underwater photographers, and her contribution was one of the reasons that the films of Hans Hass became such great successes.

Lotte's contributions, both in front and behind the camera, in bringing the beauty of the underwater world to movie screens around the world, cannot be over estimated. She is acknowledged as the world's first underwater scuba diving model. This year, as she celebrates her 80th birthday, it is time to revisit not only Lotte's pioneering role in diving but also her photogenic qualities that landed her, and the new sport of scuba diving, on the pages of some of the world's leading publications.

The Early Years

Lotte Baierl was born in Vienna, Austria, on November 6, 1928. By 1947 she had just finished



(Above) 1950. The Red Sea. Hans Hass and Lotte Baierl wearing oxygen rebreathers and with their early underwater camera housings.

(Left) p11. 1949. Lotte Baierl with an early underwater camera and face mask.

(Opposite) 1952. Australia. Lotte photographed on her visit to Australia.



1952 Australia. Lotte sporting pigtails poses with her underwater Akustische Leica housing.

her final school exams and was, like many other young people, a great fan of fellow Austrian Hans Hass, whose underwater exploits were well documented in Europe, and particularly in Vienna, where he was based. About the time Lotte finished her studies, Hass was looking for a secretary for his office in Vienna. The 18-year-old Lotte applied for the job.

In her 1972 autobiography, *Girl on the Ocean Floor*, Lotte describes her first meeting with Hans Hass. "I don't know how I had imagined an underwater explorer at home; in any case I was rather disappointed. I knew Hass only from pictures and from films: sunburnt, with a diving mask and a shock of bleached hair. Now he was wearing a green huntsman's suit, and with his beard looked more like a forester."

Hass hired Lotte for the position, and besides the daily work in the office, she also learned about the use of Hass' diving gear and his underwater cameras. This unique knowledge was something she eagerly acquired, as it was her great ambition to actually use it to become a team member on one of Hass' expeditions. She trained in swimming pools and took underwater photos in the waters around Vienna.

On learning of his new secretary's diving ambitions, Hass was anything but supportive. He told Lotte that it was not possible for a girl to be a team member on one of his expeditions because the work was too hard and dangerous. Besides, a girl would almost certainly cause quarrels within an all-male team. Lotte was naturally disillusioned with the situation, but did not quit.

It was not long before circumstances were to favor her, as Hass was planning on filming a documentary of his upcoming 1950 diving expedition to the Red Sea. Hass wanted to acquire his own research ship, to replace the one lost as spoils-of-war to the Russians. A successful underwater film should garner him enough money to be able to purchase a vessel.

In Vienna, Hass began negotiations with Anton Schuchmann, the director of Sascha-Filmproduktion. Schuchmann told Hass that a documentary film about sharks, corals and the desert would be very nice, but that it would never bring enough money for his plan. The subject matter limited the audience appeal. To get the sort of money Hass was looking for he needed to make a proper feature film, with actors and a script. And more importantly, cast an attractive leading lady to bring some glamour to the project.

At first Hass thought this was a joke – or even a secret agreement between Lotte and Schuchmann, so that Lotte could wiggle her way onto the expedition. Lotte had never worked as an actress before, and now she should play the leading part in a film which would be of great importance for the future ambitions of Hans Hass?

Nien! It was unthinkable!

But what Schuchmann was saying was correct, and eventually Hass had no other choice: Lotte had to become a part of the Hans Hass expedition team. This was the break that Lotte had been dreaming of, and it was to change the course of both their lives and of underwater movie-making.

Film Pioneers

The 1950 Hans Hass expedition to the Red Sea was very laborious and difficult, but ultimately successful. Working from native dhows, Hass produced the first in-water footage of manta rays and whale sharks. Coral gardens and shipwrecks were also explored and filmed.

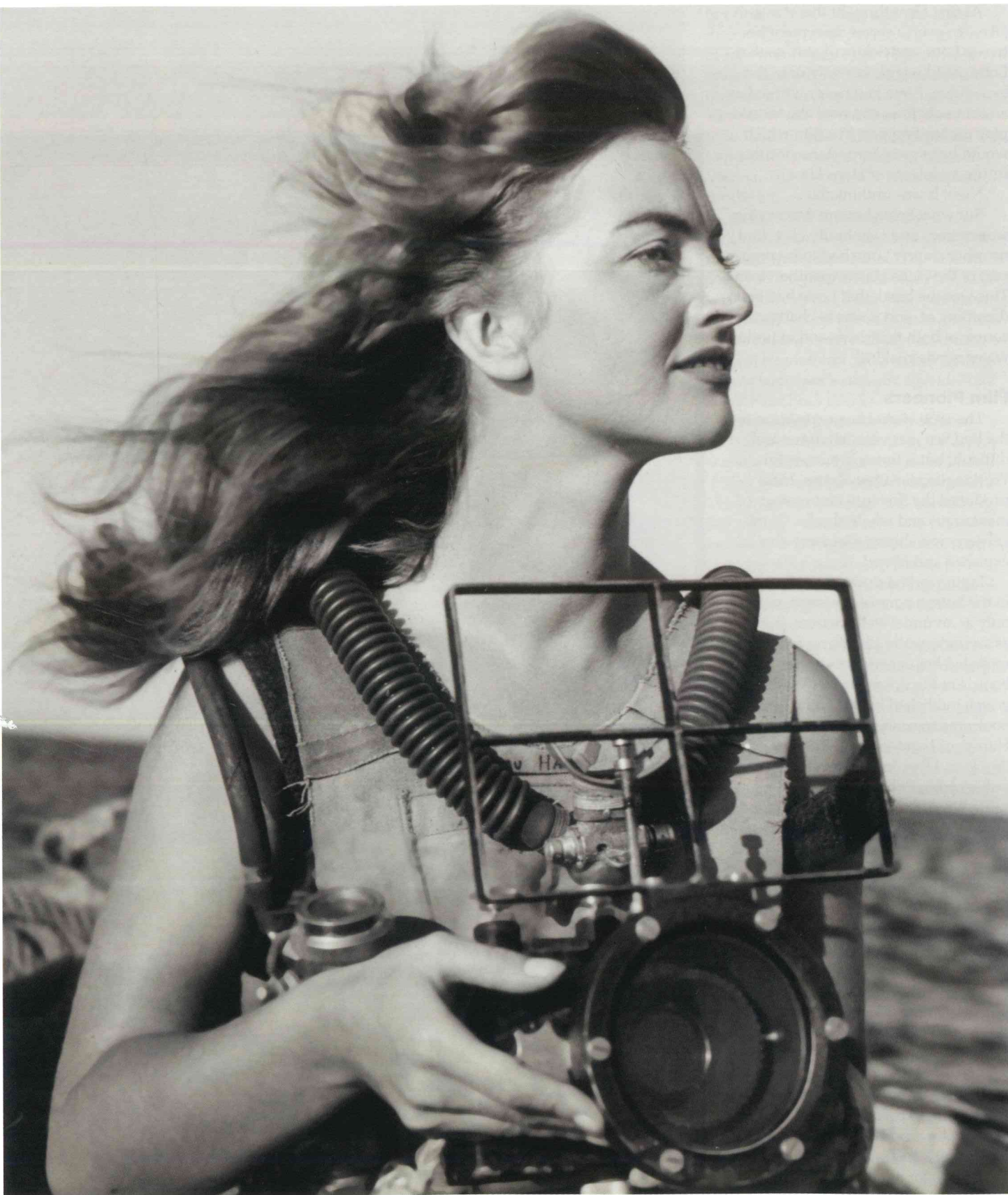
Lotte worked during these months in the hottest zone of the earth, not only as an underwater actress, but also as an underwater photographer. Lotte recorded her experiences in her 1970 book, *Ein Maedchen auf dem Meeresgrund*, published in Germany. The book was translated and published by Harrap of London in 1972 as *Girl on the Ocean Floor*. In 1976 an edition was published in Polish.

In November 1950, after six scorching months at the Red Sea, all necessary scenes were filmed and Hass and Lotte returned to Vienna. On their way back they had a short stop in Cairo, where Hans asked Lotte to marry him. The wedding took place on November 29, 1950, in Kuesnacht near Lake Zurich.

The film they made, "Abenteuer im Roten Meer" or "Under the Red Sea," was a great success, taking first prize at the 1951 Venice Biennale Film Festival. Between 1951 and 1955 this film was screened in cinemas around the world, and audiences became interested in the underwater world and diving. The film was in black and white, but this proved no obstacle for its success. The imagery from this new underwater world and the glamorous but tough leading lady made a lasting impression. Lotte had played a significant role in all aspects of the film and proved to be a natural talent, playing her role like a professional Hollywood actress.



1953. Lotte prepares to dive using an O2 rebreather and early face mask and nose clip.



A Star is Born

The world press clamored for interviews and photos with this very pretty, and equally likable blonde, who swam with sharks and seemingly had no fear of danger. Soon Lotte's face was on the title page of leading illustrated newspapers in Europe and the United States and the interviews always filled several pages inside.

As his new wife enjoyed international stardom, Hass savored his reward for following Schuchmann's advice. He had made sufficient money to purchase the spectac-

(Above) 1953. Lotte with her rebreather and her underwater Akustische Leica housing.

(Opposite) 1953. Lotte at sea with the famed *Xarifa* in the background.





ular research yacht, *Xarifa*. During the 1950s Lotte accompanied Hass on his expeditions.

A Daughter is Born

After the birth of their daughter Meta in 1958, and the sale of the *Xarifa* in 1960, Lotte focused her time on raising her daughter.

She returned to the film business only once, in 1976, for a role in German producer Herbert Ringelmann's "Der Mann aus Portofino," or "The Man from Portofino." In it she plays the role of a victim who gets run over by a sailing ship. It was typical German humor.

Today Lotte stays in the background, supporting Hass in his ongoing projects. In 1997 she and Hans received the Historical Diver Magazine Pioneer Award from the HDS USA.

1950. Lotte posing with her camera in the year of her first Red Sea expedition.

They joined the Society's Advisory Board the same year.

In 1998 they returned to California to attend the HDS/Santa Barbara Underwater Film Festival honoring their careers. Lotte was subsequently inducted into The Women Divers Hall of Fame, and returned to New York with Hans in 2006 to be honored with the Beneath The Sea Legends Award.

Today, as she approaches her 80th birthday, Lotte looks back on a totally unique career that she enjoyed on the very leading edge of underwater exploration and filmmaking. To celebrate her career we have selected a few photographs from the Hans Hass Institute Archives that will remind us all of a time when the seas were still unexplored and a beautiful young woman beckoned us to join her on her great adventures under the Red Sea.

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Circa 1950s. Various international magazine covers and media images of Lotte Hass.

