

Hans and Lotte Hass: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewees:

Hans and Lotte Hass

Name of interviewer:

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1. The first expeditions

Int: This morning I am honoured and absolutely delighted to be with Herr Professor Hans Hass, and his equally famous wife Lotte, in their home in the centre of the beautiful city of Vienna. Both of them became familiar to television viewers throughout the world for their pioneering underwater films, which introduced to people, what was then, a new world of marine life beneath the waves. Hans were you born in Vienna?

HH: Yes, I am a Viennese.

Int: And Lotte too?

LH: Me too, yes.

Int: How did you become interested in natural history and underwater photography? Did your father encourage you in some way?

HH: No. My father was a very well known lawyer and he hoped that I would take over his business. And I was first, very interested in sports things, I was in the terraziano. But in 19— When I was 18, I went to the south of France and there, by chance, I met an American, Guy Gilpatric, from the Saturday Evening Post (1), who was the really inventor of a new sport. Of the sport to dive underwater, with small little goggles, that did no other goggles exist and, there were no fins yet, and a three metre long spear, and I watched him at the Caponteeve. He was swimming without motions, and then he came up and had a, a fish speared, and he

told me how I could buy such a spear and such goggles, and so I started to be his pupil. And I was very excited by the possibility of observing the behaviour of fish underwater and I realised that we get a completely different view of fish, if we transform ourselves, in a fish ourselves. So that was the very beginning. I came back to Vienna, gave a lecture in my sport club, nobody believed me, so I had the idea of constructing the first underwater small camera to bring proofs to my friends, and that was the beginning. And further expeditions followed, first in 1939, to the Caribbean (2), with Jörg Böhler and Alfred Wurzian, two friend of mine, and we were the first to enter into the coral reefs, to get in touch with sharks, to find out how they behave, and so on, that was the beginning of my career.

Int: And 1939, so just before the war broke out, and I believe you actually were stuck out there when the war started?

HH: Yes. Instead of two months, we stayed eight months, and then we found a way to go back via the United States, Japan, Russia and it was quite a while, I was, my underwater photographs were shown all over the continent but I had only the first chance to make further expeditions, to the Red Sea, to Port Sudan, in 1949. And I was the first to take photographs of manta rays, apart from sharks, and so I made a second expedition, where Lotte joined us, to make a full feature film (3) in order to gain money, for buying, and own research vessel [Xarifa], and we were successful, our film, Adventure in the Red Sea (3), got the first prize in Venice, at the 1951 film festival.

Int: Yes, now you came on that expedition as Hans said Lotte, but I gather you had a terrible job persuading him originally to let you come on an expedition. You started as a secretary to Hans didn't you?

LH: Yes, it was like that. I knew the books of Hans, and for me I had only one wish to take part of such expedition, and then I found out that he doesn't want to take a wife along. And when he was trying to make the film, he, I was going with him to the film firm, they should give him money for the expedition and I before already told the director of this film that I would love so much to go on this expedition with him. So the director said, "Doctor Hass, if you want to make a film and we should give you money, we can show this only on Sunday morning, but if you would take, for instance, Lotte along, I think, this would give the film a chance to be shown in the evening as well," and so —

HH: And so it happened, so it happened. It was a good idea, because I didn't want to take any female along because, pretty women gives problems to men, but so I told her the first day, "That from tomorrow on you are a man," and she understood what I said, and made it excellent and she become the best member of the expedition.

LH: You know and for me it was very difficult because, the other men didn't want that I'm in the film, because they thought that when we come back all newspapers would write about me and not about them.

HH: And so it happened.

Int: I'm sure that would have happened, yes.

LH: And so I had to be brave, I had not to show fear if the sharks come, also because then the others would say, "Ha, ha, ha she" —

Int: But I mean, in trying to persuade Hans originally to take you, I mean you used these subtle methods that women use with men, in that I gather that when you were just his secretary, that you, when he went on a lecture tour, I read in an article about you that you borrowed his camera, without him knowing, and went and filmed in the Danube. Can you tell us all, and you even practiced, in the early mornings of the cold weather, going under the waves?

LH: I wanted so much to take part of an expedition. I trained everyday with Olympic trainer, in a swimming hall, in Vienna and I thought what can I do that he takes me along. So one day, as my sister had a house on the old Danube and I also had a boyfriend with whom I was sailing there everyday, I thought it would be quite a good idea because, of course, I knew all the places and I knew the water, if I would try to take pictures, and if they are published, this would give him the possibility to think that maybe it is not a bad idea to take her along. And I took this camera off him and made the films. It was late October and the water was very cold, but I was so familiar with the old Danube that I didn't care. And then I brought the picture to the great Austrian magazine, and I was title, and they published my pictures and then —

HH: When I come back I was very surprised.

Int: Not too pleased, I suspect.

HH: Well, I was pleased I've always been fair; I mean her photographs were excellent, of fish of all kinds; it's like a jungle on the bed of the old Danube.

LH: But, I must be fair because, there was also a man, he's called Kurt Schafer, and he knew how to photograph, and how the best way to do it, because he worked for Hans and they all helped me. It was my chance.

Int: Anyway, it did only half convinced you, and it was really that film distributor, saying you really would make such a difference to your films, as far as the public are concerned, if Lotte were to be part of them, that really finally clinched it, as you said. And anyway, as you said, Lotte proved her worth on this first expedition, on this expedition to the Red Sea (3) and really behaved, you know, like a man on the expedition, and at the end, I mean, I think you were pretty tired at the end of this exhausting expedition but—

LH: He said, "You married me because you were tired"!

Int: Ah yes, I wasn't hoping to —

HH: Who knows, who knows —

Int: But only that, that was when you thought about it, that when you proposed, at the end of that trip, in Egypt to Lotte.

HH: The great problem was, to make a feature film with a story, and so we were the first to be successful in

this way, to film, to make a film which is not just a documentary film, but, which tells a story and that's why the film, Red Sea Adventure (3), became so successful.

Int: And of course it really did make you famous throughout the world, and of course, attracted the attention of the Americans. I believe, weren't you invited to Hollywood?

HH: Well, we were invited to. We sold the picture to RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum Radio Pictures Inc.) and, but they retransformed it in the editing for the American taste and that meant, among other things, that we filmed the love play of fish in the Red Sea, and I was always interested in taking sound, from the vibrations of the various fish, and we tried, in the Red Sea, to send sounds in the sea also. We sent the Viennese Waltz, and for some reason or other, I don't know why, hundreds of fish came and swam in a big circle, around these loud speaker. And afterwards in the American versions, the American editor, they changed it, they said, "Well he send the Viennese Waltz, and everywhere in the sea the fish congregated and made love to each other". He took whatever I had photographed about the love play of fish, and so after the opening in, in New York, when the fish film (2) was shown, old ladies came out and said, "Oh Doctor Hass, we had to, how wonderful, we knew that love, that fish like to —"

Int: Dance to music.

HH: Yes, dance to the music, and I didn't really know what to say, against it.

Int: But, I remember seeing this sequence, this film sequence; it was really quite impressive, the editors did a marvellous job.

HH: Yes.

LH: It was shown in England as well, yes.

2. Making the first underwater film

Int: If I can go back a bit, back to your original trip in 1939 in Antilles, Curacao, and that's where I think you made, that's where I read, you really made all sorts of refinements and improvements to the diving and film cameras you had. First off, you, because after all you built your first underwater camera yourself, didn't you, you waterproofed it and so on? And that trip enabled you to make many improvements in the Antilles.

HH: Well, we made improvement, only these cameras were very primitive, yet later we made better cameras, on our further expeditions. When we started with our Xarifa expeditions to the Indian Ocean, we were equipped with underwater television and all kind of gadgets.

Int: Yes and you made a film didn't you, as well, in 1939, was it Pirsch under Water, unter Wasser (2)?

HH: Yes.

Int: Stalking under Water (2)?

HH: Yes, this was the very film, Stalking under Water (2); it showed especially the beauty of coral fish, in the reefs but also, it shows, a big, a four-metre long, hammer head shark. But we found out that these sharks are very shy.

Int: And was this film shown in the cinemas in Germany, or elsewhere?

HH: It was later shown in Germany, and later I started making one film after the other. I made 105 films.

Int: My goodness, because already your film making, up to the beginning of the war made you well known in Germany, so I understood, that when you were classified as unfit to join the army, that they allowed you to take a ship and film in the Aegean (4). Is that so?

HH: In the Aegean we were interested to enter into submarine holes and grottos, and there I found *Reteporidae*. I found the reason for my doctor, for my doctorate.

Int: You did your doctorate then, on this?

HH: Yes, on this. And we also were interested in the Aegean because there they use dynamite to fish, which is forbidden, but we heard that when they throw dynamite into sea, then sharks appear very quickly. Normally in the Mediterranean Sea you never see a shark, but after the explosions, within a few minutes, there come a lot, and we were able, so we contact these people and went with them, and after, when they threw their bombs, we were interested in the behaviour of the sharks. They came very quickly, and we often had up to ten sharks swimming around, eating these dead fish, and so this was the highlight of my first full feature film, Men and Sharks (4). That was turned, completed in the Aegean in 1942.

Int: So really, very early work. And of course that started, as you say, your particular interest in sharks. You became very well known for your research on them.

HH: And, we used the first diving equipment, oxygen equipment, which allowed us to stay underwater for an hour.

LH: 1942.

Int: And you, too?

LH: 1942.

Int: 1942, very early, yes, and, but I mean, you had one or two risky, you nearly lost your life trying out this

oxygen equipment didn't you, because it can be poisonous, when you go too deep.

HH: Yes, if you go too deep, I mean the limit, we didn't know then what is the limit, and it's about 20 metres. Sometimes we went a little deeper, but using pure oxygen, is a nice thing, because it's a recycling instrument, where you do not blow out the air in the water, so you are, you do not make any sounds under water and the fish come close to you and you can observe them much better.

Int: A great advantage yes, but I mean you, in testing this you went too deep once and became unconscious, I read. Nasty experience.

HH: Yes. Finding the pieces for my collections, I went much deeper and suddenly I couldn't see well, and it would have been better swimming up and putting a line around my body, and make this experiment, but I thought it is a new kind of diving equipment, and, I must find out what happens further. And so I stayed down and suddenly it became all white around me, and I got unconscious. And it was a good coincidence that I swam up, without my knowledge, and that I was found, and when I came to life again or to —

Int: Recovered anyway —

HH: Recovered, then my friends were sitting around me and I'd forgotten my memory, so I didn't know, they said, well you are old Greek fisherman, with a very ugly wife, and six children. What can you do; it took a few days until I could memorise again.

Int: Remember everything again, yes, and, but of course, since you were going up against limits, unknowns, at that time, you must really have been quite afraid on occasions?

HH: Well, you are afraid on occasions, especially if the water is not clear, you cannot see clear, and you go into the unknown, then, fear is something very normal.

Int: It was always with you, you wrote somewhere —

HH: Yes but —

Int: You over came it, obviously.

HH: To be courageous, means to, overcome your very normal fear.

Int: And, but you were always careful and cautious, at the same time?

HH: I was always careful and cautious.

Int: But, people, someone said, that if you saw a shark, I mean you would immediately dive in and swim towards it, and you proved to people, as I think you implied a little while ago, that they are much less dangerous to humans than is commonly believed.

HH: Well today, all the many divers, there are millions of them today, they know how sharks are, it's not a problem, to keep sharks away, to find some, come close to them, watch them, photograph them.

Int: And their beauty and grace.

HH: They are very beautiful animals.

3. Filming on the Xarifa

Int: Yes, now of course, one of the trips you did was to the Galapagos (5), when Eibl von Eibesfeldt came with you, and so on, and you had quite a number of research biologists, I believe, with you, and I think quite a lot of interesting scientific results came out of that study, and that's where, did you encounter the whale shark?

LH: Yes.

Int: And you swam with —

LH: No, no pot whale.

Int: Oh the pot whale, the sperm whale.

LH: Whale sharks we already filmed in the Red Sea.

Int: Red sea, I'm sorry.

LH: Three years before.

Int: Yes, no, I meant the sperm whale, and of course I've seen a photograph of you, Lotte, holding onto its flukes at the back, quite impressive. Can you tell us a bit about that? I mean it was quite a thing to swim up to this huge whale, the biggest in the world.

LH: Yes. Actually, the first swim did Hans, and he always went in alone first, then he allowed me, or us, to follow him and of course, it was when you can't see. I only had with about 2 metres long, it's a fascinating thing, that you don't see actually, you have just this big mouth with opens and has forty-two big teeth and —

HH: When all this happened it's the Azores. That was the first place.

Int: At the Azores?

HH: At the Azores, there they still hunt the sperm whales, as in the old days, and we went out with Jimmy Hodges, who was with me and Lotte, and we went out, far out, to the Atlantic. They have spies to see from the high mountains when they come up, and so we went out and there, suddenly, one of these sperm whales will stay underwater an hour, then come up very fast to take some breath, to go back and suddenly we saw the boats around us shouting that one huge male was swimming in our direction. So I thought I would have the first try alone, and I jumped in the water, and it looked like a big engine that came swimming right under the water, with the spouting of the water. And I went down eight metres, and waited, and it was, deep sea, it were outside, we were far off the Azores, and I knew that within a few seconds I would come across, this largest carnivorous animal, on, of earth. And suddenly I saw this thing, and it looked, as you mention, very strange because you cannot see underwater the eye, a sperm whale has two eyes on the side, but two to four metres back, the head is six metres long, so in this case it was four metres back, there were the eyes. Later on the photographs, I could spot where the eye is, but underwater you don't see an eye, and if you meet a creature that doesn't look at you with an eye, it is a very strange feeling; you have a very strange emotion. And I took the first photograph, and this big mouth came past me, with this fluke swimming fast, and I made the first shot of the head of a sperm whale, of Moby Dick (6). And believe it or not, he heard the clicking of noise of my camera, and the whole animal went straight down into the deep and disappeared. That was the beginning, and then we, Jimmy Hodges, Lotte and I, we also filmed, when they are harpooned, when the blood spreads out in the water, when sharks come from the deep ocean, and bite into the, at the places where they are wounded.

Int: The harpoon went in —

HH: Where the blood comes out, but the interesting thing is that even then they didn't harm us at all. When they saw us, they made a way around us, as if they wanted not —

Int: Because we are not familiar animals to them under the water, so —

HH: That is right, but they are gentle. I mean with their tremendous mouth they could have snapped, but they didn't.

Int: What have you got there Lotte?

LH: [shows sperm whale tooth] Yes, there is forty teeth like that. This is one of them.

Int: Not that particular one, but —

LH: No, it is quite impressive —

Int: You didn't do any dentistry on it.

LH: They open this mouth which you have in front of me. Actually, this picture, which shows me on the tail of such a sperm whale,

HH: A female

LH: Was published in Time Magazine (7), two sides, over two sides.

Int: A two-page spread or double spread, yes.

LH: Exactly yes.

Int: Now you made a film, on the, about your expedition in the Caribbean with the Xarifa, was that Unternehmen Xarifa (5)?

HH: It was Unternehmen Xarifa (5).

Int: That's right, which is I suppose translating in English is Undertaking Xarifa (5), or did it mean Expedition Xarifa (5)?

HH: Not, it has an English title.

Int: Oh, is it Under the, no, Under the Caribbean (5)?

HH: Under the Caribbean (5).

Int: Ah that's the English title. I wondered.

HH: That is the English title.

*Int: And it was the first German **techni-colour** film, I believe?*

HH: It was the first techni-colour film.

LH: And, it was shown in London, on Peakman's Theatre.

Int: Which theatre?

LH: Peakman's Theatre, this one of the —

HH: No, no, Peakman's Theatre is in New York. This is another one, where the Queen always makes her great reception.

Int: I think it is usually Leicester Square, Odeon.

LH: Leicester Square

HH: Yes, Leicester Square.

LH: Yes exactly, Leicester Square.

HH: And it was very successful, and on the next expedition, to the Indian Ocean as far as (8) — [HH turns to LH and speaks in German].

LH: On this next expedition —

HH: Singapore.

LH: We had, we were the first to go to the Maldiv Islands (9), which was 1957.

HH: But what I wanted to stress is that, on this expedition, the great problem was, for financing the film, we had to make 26 half-hour films (8) —

LH: For BBC

HH: Which were very successful in England also —

Int: That's right, on television.

HH: On television, but that was the great difficulty that I had not only to guide this expedition but 26 half-hour films (8). That is 13 hour of film.

Int: Hard work, and, of course, I think was it the success of Under the Caribbean (5) that enabled you to buy the Xarifa originally?



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HH: That is right, that is right.

Int: And I think you invested virtually all your money in it didn't you at the time, doing it —

LH: Yes.

Int: It was your home and research base.

LH: You know when Hans said, "I would like now myself to study things, not always try to make money," that was the reason that he sold the ship, and then we were invited by the owner, of the Xarifa now, and I, we were invited for him, and I said, "No, actually, I don't want to go," because, to think that this belongs now to another man, this hurts me, but Hans said, "No, you know I like to sit on Xarifa, and relax —"

HH: Not be responsible any more.

LH: "And don't have to think what I could now do, to get money," so I then, I was quite happy that we went.

Int: But, you were quite, you were able to remember the old days and all the great successes you had. Did this film, Under the Caribbean (5) win you an Oscar?

LH: In America, yes.

Int: In 1959?

HH: Yes, an Underwater Oscar, a Diver Oscar.

Int: And then of course this led, I know, the success of this film, led the BBC to approach you about television programmes on the BBC.

HH: Yes, that was —

LH: No, this was already Under the Red Sea (3).

Int: Oh Under the Red Sea already attracted the, I see.

HH: I think we have done our duty now, because if really in England it should be a longer thing, I should be in a better position, this I mean, I mean, I think we should finish now.



Int: Oh yes, right, OK, fine

END

Glossary

Techni-colour: A process of making colour motion films using synchronized monochrome films, each of a different colour, which are later superimposed to produce a full colour print.

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