

Mrs. Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994)

The „Anima of the Freiburg Institute“

A Personal Appreciation

EBERHARD BAUER¹

Abstract – The dominant and most popular figure in German parapsychology after the Second World War was Professor Hans Bender, who founded in 1950 the “Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene e.V.” (IGPP for short) [Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health] in his birthplace and hometown of Freiburg im Breisgau, directed it until his death on 7 May 1991 and represented the field of scientific parapsychology in research and teaching at the University of Freiburg for decades between 1954 and 1975 as an internationally renowned professor of frontier areas of psychology. In his attempts to build up the IGPP and to realize a central wish of his scientific life, Bender received decisive help and support by Mrs Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994) who became his close collaborator quite early in 1946, when he developed his first plans to build an Institute devoted to parapsychological research and its social implications under the label “Grenzgebiete der Psychologie.” Mrs. Böhringer was educated as a commercial employee and she left no trace in the formal parapsychological literature, except figuring in some pictures documenting the early history of the IGPP, mostly taken by a professional photographer Leif Geiges (1915–1990), who helped to popularize the Institute and its founder. It was decisively thanks to her initiative, her ingenuity and her sense of reality that the Institute could be built during the post war years on a plot of land in the city of Freiburg in a most beautiful location. After the IGPP building was completed in 1950, Mrs. Böhringer moved into a flat inside that building where she stayed all her life. The Institute and its social life became the center of her life, comparable to an ‘apple of her eye’ (Augapfel). In summary, one could describe her role as “Geschäftsführerin” (manager) responsible for all possible aspects of the daily life of the Institute. So, understandably, Professor Bender used to characterize Lotte Böhringer as “Seele des Instituts” (Anima of the Institute).

Keywords: IGPP – Hans Bender – supporting staff – role of women in science – parapsychology

1 **Eberhard Bauer** is a psychologist by training and was for many years an assistant of Prof. Hans Bender. He is a council member and the deputy director of the IGPP. Bauer knew Lotte Böhringer since his student times, when he started an internship as a psychology student at the IGPP in 1967. So, this contribution is written from a personal perspective. – Thanks are due to the IGPP archivist Uwe Schellinger, M. A., for his archival research and to Andreas Fischer for his help and support regarding the selection and reproduction of pictures illustrating this essay.

Frau Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994) – die „Anima des Freiburger Instituts“ Eine persönliche Würdigung

Zusammenfassung – Die dominierende und populärste Figur der deutschen Parapsychologie nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg war Hans Bender, der 1950 in seiner Geburts- und Heimatstadt Freiburg im Breisgau das „Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene e. V.“ (IGPP) gründete, es bis zu seinem Tode am 7. Mai 1991 leitete und von 1954 bis 1975 als international bekannter Professor für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie das Fach Parapsychologie jahrzehntelang in Forschung und Lehre an der Universität Freiburg vertrat. Bei seinem Versuch, das Institut zu errichten und damit einen zentralen Wunsch seines wissenschaftlichen Lebens zu verwirklichen, erhielt Bender entscheidende Hilfe und Unterstützung von Frau Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994), die schon 1946, als er seine ersten Pläne zum Aufbau eines Instituts für Grenzgebietforschung und ihre gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen unter der Bezeichnung „Grenzgebiete der Psychologie“ konzipierte, seine enge Mitarbeiterin wurde. Frau Böhringer, von Beruf kaufmännische Angestellte, hat in der formalen parapsychologischen Literatur keine Spuren hinterlassen, außer auf einigen Bildern, die die frühe Geschichte des IGPP dokumentieren, meist aufgenommen von einem professionellen Fotografen, Leif Geiges, (1915–1990), der half, das Institut und seinen Gründer bekannt zu machen. Ihrer Initiative, ihrem Einfallsreichtum und ihrem Realitätssinn war es maßgeblich zu verdanken, dass das Institut in den Nachkriegsjahren auf einem Grundstück in der Stadt Freiburg in schönster Lage errichtet werden konnte. Nach der Fertigstellung des IGPP-Gebäudes im Jahre 1950 bezog Frau Böhringer eine Wohnung in diesem Gebäude, in der sie ihr ganzes Leben lang blieb. Das Institut und sein soziales Leben wurden zu ihrem Lebensmittelpunkt, quasi ihr „Augapfel“. In ihrer Rolle als „Geschäftsführerin“ war sie für alle möglichen Aspekte des täglichen Lebens des Instituts verantwortlich. Verständlich also, dass Professor Bender Lotte Böhringer als „Seele (anima) des Instituts“ bezeichnete.

Schlüsselbegriffe: IGPP – Hans Bender – Unterstützungspersonal – Rolle von Frauen in der Wissenschaft – Parapsychologie

In a remarkable conversation with his successor Prof. Johannes Mischo (1930–2001), published in 1983, where he reviewed stations of his own scientific biography, Prof. Hans Bender (1907–1991), the founder of the IGPP, was asked by Johannes Mischo: “What actually motivated you after the end of the Second World War and gave you the courage to set up the Institute on the Eichhalde, which you then called Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene?” Bender’s answer was quite characteristic: “The conviction that parapsychology practised in an attic [Mansarde] was regarded as a suspect hobby, but located in a representative Institute building would attract attention. Supported by Mrs Lotte Böhringer – still the anima of the Institute today – I became a businessman, wishful thinking and daydreaming anticipation of the goal became money in a field of the ‘attraction of the relatable’” [Anziehungskraft des Bezüglichen] (Mischo, 1983: 18f.).

At the time of this interview, 1983, Bender could look back on a long international career: He had become the dominant and most popular figure in German parapsychology after World War II and had represented the field of scientific parapsychology in research and teaching at the University of Freiburg for decades between 1954 and 1975 as an internationally renowned professor of frontier areas of psychology.² So it is important that he mentioned in this context Mrs Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994) who played indeed a most important role when it came to the realization of Hans Bender's central wish, namely creating "a representative Institute building." Bender was intrigued by this idea quite early in his academic career, when he founded a "Grenzwissenschaftliches Institut" [Institute for Frontier Science] at the so-called Reichsuniversität Straßburg during the war.³ In 1946, after returning to his birthplace and hometown of Freiburg im Breisgau, he created a "Forschungsgemeinschaft für psychologische Grenzgebiete" [Research Association for Psychological Frontier Areas], where Lotte Böhringer started to work on September 16, 1946, as "Geschäftsführerin" (managing director). In a document dated August 31, 1948, Bender describes her activities as follows: "During her two-year tenure, she has worked with extraordinary diligence and great care to build up the Institute while at the same time leading other enterprises in the research association. Mrs Böhringer will take over the administration of a permanent position in the Institute" (see Figure 1).

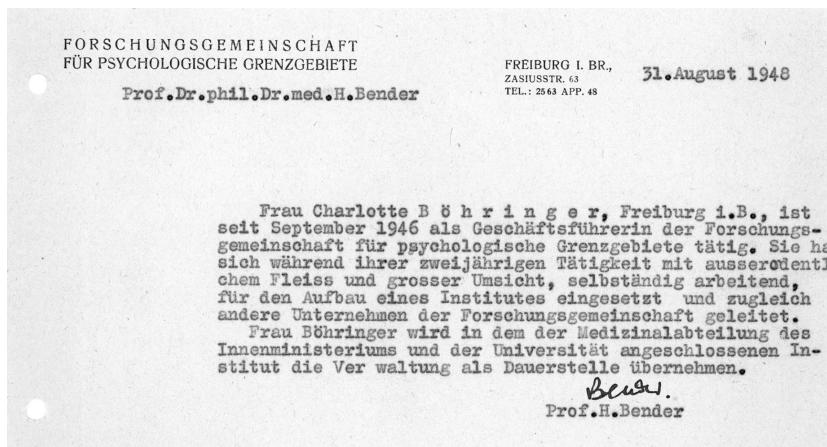


Figure 1. Prof. Bender's letter describing Lotte Böhringer's activities 1948 within the "Forschungsgemeinschaft." (Archive of the IGPP)

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- 2 For Hans Bender's biography and his academic career at Freiburg University see the recent monograph by historian Anna Lux (2021) who was granted access to the Bender papers at the IGPP.
- 3 For details of this episode see the book by Frank-Rutger Hausmann (2006), esp. pp. 101ff.

In retrospect, it is mainly thanks to her initiative and ingenuity that the beautiful building erected on the property of the city of Freiburg came into being from the laboriously collected funds in the time of ruins and hunger. After the IGPP building was completed in 1950, Mrs. Böhringer moved into an apartment in this building, which became the center of her whole life (see Figure 2).

When talking about the history of his Institute, Bender never forgot to mention, that Lotte Böhringer did everything to make this building possible, she fed the workers, took care of the furnishings, tended the garden and supervised the library. When the research work began, she took an organizational part in the investigations and stood in at the typewriter when there was not enough money for a secretary.

When in 1953 a bequest from the Swiss biologist and parapsychologist Fanny Moser (1872–1953) secured the financial situation of the Institute to a modest extent,⁴ Mrs Böhringer prudently, caringly and always sparingly took over the administration of this foundation and remained what she was: everywhere and always ready for action, personally modest, but equally practical in her thinking, determined and clear about the financial possibilities and limits of the Institute.

The “Eichhalde Institute,” as it was called at that time, was Bender’s most personal creation. Under his direction (and with the tireless collaboration of Lotte Böhringer), it became a centre of lively research, information and educational work in Germany for more than thirty years, to which – thanks to the growing popularity of its director – countless people turned for advice



Figure 2. View at the Eichhalde-Institut – Lotte Böhringer’s flat can be recognized by three small windows in the attic (from left). (Archive of the IGPP)

⁴ cf. Schmied-Knittel (2022, this issue).



Figure 3. Lotte Böhringer as assistant in the background taking notes during a (staged) glass tilting session.
(Archive of the IGPP)

time her clear and determining sense of reality proved to be quite helpful. There is one telling anecdote to illustrate this point:

In the early 1950s, a woman, a former Red Cross nurse who had been declared “possessed” by a Catholic priest, visited the Institute to be examined by Prof. Bender and a befriended psychiatrist. Mrs. Böhringer had a spontaneous personal contact with this woman in need. Because of the care and attention the client received during her visit, she wanted to personally demonstrate her “possession” state to Lotte Böhringer. When the bells of the Freiburg cathedral began to ring at twelve o’clock on Saturday, the “devil” inside the “possessed” woman began to growl and announced that he would “appear” at two o’clock in the afternoon. The intrepid Mrs. Böhringer interrupted the “devil” and said in her own unmistakable way: “Nix da! I have

and help. In the early 1950s, with the help of the professional photographer Leif Geiges (1915–1990),⁵ numerous articles and interviews appeared in newspapers and popular magazines about Bender and the Freiburg Institute, sometimes featuring Lotte Böhringer in a white coat as a research assistant (Figures 3–5).

So it is understandable that a never-ending stream of visitors from all over the world praised the special location of the Institute with its beautiful view over the Rhine plain – called “magic hill” – and the hospitality of the Institute’s director. Visitors included mediums and magicians, astrologers and ufologists, radiesthesists and dowsers, witches and healers, gurus and charlatans, spiritistic believers and diehard sceptics, psychotics and serious scientists, school classes and student groups, television crews and hardened journalists – they all came to Freiburg to see and talk to Hans Bender, the famous “Spukprofessor.”

In dealing with all these visitors of a quite different personal and personal background, Lotte Böhringer’s empathy and at the same

⁵ cf. Fischer & Vaitl (Eds., 2021) for an exhibition catalog on photographs by Geiges.

my usual lunch break from 2pm to 4pm! This is my time to eat and sleep a little! Nothing will happen here before four o’clock!” Finally, the “devil” complied with Mrs Böhringer’s strict instructions. He “appeared” duly after four o’clock. Her resolute manner had put even the “very worst” (Allerärgsten) in his place...⁶

In private talks, Hans Bender sometimes commented on “Lotte’s” spontaneous paranormal experiences and dreams. A striking example found also anonymously entrance in his first book on parapsychology that he published after World War II, in 1954, the year when he received his personal chair for “Grenzgebiete der Psychologie” [Frontier Areas of Psychology] at Freiburg University. Hans Bender points out that paranormal impressions usually reflect the real facts in a very blurred, diffuse and only fragmentary way and describes the following example:

... in a case in which I myself was involved as an unconscious “transmitter.” I was driving in a very old car an hour before midnight on the motorway from Heidelberg to



Figure 4. (above) Lotte Böhringer during a (staged) session with a pendulum.

Figure 5. (below) Lotte Böhringer observing the demonstration of an alleged “metal bender” who had visited the Institute.
(Archive of the IGPP)

⁶ Lotte Böhringer’s realistic down-to-earth attitude is also reflected in the one and only interview which she gave during her lifetime shortly after Bender’s death, to a local newspaper on the occasion of her 45 years jubilee at the IGPP. It has the telling title “Weltfremd? Von wegen” [Otherwordly? No way] (Rüffer, 1991).

Karlsruhe and was asked by a black man in uniform to give him a lift. The man was behaving unusually in the car, was grumpy and tense. I got a bit spooked and imagined that in a state of emergency he might be up to no good and perhaps try to seize the car and get rid of me. I started an English conversation aimed at telling him that he would have little pleasure in driving such an old vehicle. He made little reply, and I finally contented myself with watching his bony hands. A co-worker [L. B.] received me quite unexpectedly the next morning with the words: "You were scared. Between 11 and 12 o'clock in the night you broke down on the motorway. A man came along and threatened you. You said: 'I am a poor professor.' He threw you onto the roadway. I can still see the hands, the horrible, big bony hands" (Bender, 1954: 14–15).

Bender referred to this incident reported by Lotte to explain the unconscious dynamics of such impressions. He writes (Bender, 1954: 15): "In a waking dream fantasy, my co-worker had experienced this scene around the time of the event. It is remarkable that she does not understand English. It is apparently a fragmentary telepathic transmission, which was probably triggered by my affect and represented in a dreamlike vision a conglomeration of my fearful expectations, my expressions reduced to a concise formula and a central perceptual content: the hands."

Lotte Böhringer's important services to the Freiburg Institute were officially recognized: On December 14, 1987, she was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, on which occasion the Dean of the University of Freiburg congratulated her, although she had never formally been a member of the University of Freiburg. She outlived Hans Bender, the founder of the IGPP, by three years, while she was pleased to note that, due to his former efforts, a new chapter in the history of the IGPP was opened after the Holler Foundation in Munich had informed the IGPP Council that the Institute could count on new and substantial funding. This story is told elsewhere (see Vaitl, 2020).

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Figure 6. Lotte Böhringer and the IGPP-Team in 1959.

First row (left to right): Arno Müller (1930–2005, scientific collaborator, later Professor of Forensic Psychology, University of Saarbrücken), Lotte Böhringer (1917–1994, Managing IGPP Director), Inge Strauch (1932–2017, scientific assistant, later Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Zurich, Switzerland), Hans Bender (1907–1991, IGPP Director, Professor for Frontiers Area of Psychology, University of Freiburg).

Second Row (left zu right): Gerhard Sannwald (1929–1983, scientific assistant, later Market Researcher), Mrs. Eckert (Secretary,) Johannes Mischo (1930–2001, scientific assistant, later Bender's successor at University of Freiburg and IGPP Director 1991–2001).