***Seven Years in Tibet* (1997)**

This film, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, is based on a book of the same name by Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountaineer who was arrested and imprisoned in 1939 in British India, as war had broken out between Germany (including Austria) and the United Kingdom. He escaped into Tibet in 1944, and when the war ended, chose to remain in Tibet where we worked as a tutor for the Dalai Lama and became his friend. He returned to Austria in 1951, shortly before the Chinese invasion of Tibet that led to the Dalai Lama’s exile. The book was previously made into a documentary film in 1956.

Harrer became a member of the Nazi party and a Sergeant in the SS after Austria was annexed by Germany in 1938, and was also honored by Adolf Hitler after climbing the Eiger North Face in the Alps before the war. These details are not mentioned in the film, and were in fact initially unknown to the filmmakers. In fairness, one should note that Harrer later repented of his Nazi affiliation, and was cleared of any accusation of war crimes. The film also highlights Harrer’s estrangement from his son, which is never mentioned by him in his book. By its end, the film suggests a reconciliation with his son, but this may be entirely fictional.

Like so many films that profess to be “based on a true story,” it is worth examining how faithful it is to the actual history. As a Hollywood film featuring a young Brad Pitt, one expects some glossing of facts to create a story of personal redemption. What is accurate, however, is the fact that the Dalai Lama and Harrer shared a genuine friendship which persisted until the death of the latter in 2006. The film also shows the struggles of the young Dalai Lama to deal with the impending invasion of Tibet by China.

The 14th Dalai Lama is a compelling figure, and the film humanizes him and his friendship with Harrer. *Seven Years in Tibet* is told from Harrer’s point of view rather than the Tibetans, which might be perceived as a drawback by some viewers. Nonetheless, the film presents an interesting story of a friendship across cultural and religious backgrounds that was unusual then and remains all too rare to this day.