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Why Sunlit Vistas Could Not Be Grander: A Review of *Seven Years in Tibet*

Jean-Jacques Annaud, director. *Seven Years in Tibet* (a film from Heinrich Harrer's book), Columbia Pictures 1997.

The movie *Seven Years in Tibet* is based on a travelogue, published in Vienna in 1952, that later became what the French call "un bestseller." "Sieben Jahre in Tibet. Mein Leben am Hofe des Dalai Lama" was translated into fourteen languages and had sold more than four million copies before the release of the movie last fall. As originally published the book included sixty-six pictures taken by Heinrich Harrer while he was living at the court of the Dalai Lama. These photographs documented the mundane and religious life of Lhasa and forty years later were exhibited by two museums, the Liechtensteinischen Landesmuseum of Vaduz and the Volkerkundemuseum of the University of Zurich and were republished in their own catalogue. Harrer's unpretentious and direct account of Tibet as he saw it between 1944 and 1951 ended with a wish, that his book might encourage the world's friendship and understanding of a people that had at the time attracted so little attention. Once in a while wishes are granted by fairies and we would like to think that Harrer's wish belongs to this happy category. But is this so? Friendship for the Tibetan cause has come about, particularly in the United States, but what about understanding?

Heinrich Harrer, as described in the book, was a tough mountain climber who escaped the British POW camp of Dehra-Dun to flee to neutral Tibet. Unencumbered by formal training in Buddhist studies, Harrer knew enough Tibetan and geography to become one of the tutors of the then-young Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The Heinrich Harrer of the movie is a bit different as he is portrayed as an arrogant member of the Nazi party whose various pains as a father and as a Lhasa tailor's suitor are healed by the kindness of Tibetan buddhism. "Seven Years" and "Sieben Jahre" differ in many respects, since the film maker, Jean-Jacques Annaud, wanted his movie to be much more dramatic and romantic than the book. Five minutes after England declared war, Indian soldiers arrested Heinrich Harer as he was eating in a restaurant garden of Karachi: this is the "Sieben Jahre" report. In "Seven Years" his arrest occurred on the treacherous slopes of the Nanga Parbat mountain a few minutes after he had, wounded and bleeding, saved Peter Aufschnaiter's life.

There is something gratuitous about Jean-Jacques Annaud's embellishment of "Sieben Jahre." Research for the movie was carefully done and the reconstitution in Mendoza, Argentine, of pre-1950 Lhasa and the Potala Palace is painfully accurate. It is therefore even more difficult to excuse Annaud's new contribution to Tibet as a colorful venue for Westerners' need of mystification. The movie reviews of October 1997 however proved that Annaud reached the audience he had targeted for his fabled Shangri-la: a vast, hidden, magical, sacred kingdom. While deploring the vacuity of the Becky Johnston script and criticizing the fakeness of Pitt's German accent, reviewers awarded a few stars to "Seven Year in Tibet" for the beauty of the landscape scenery shot in the Andes.

Annaud's film adds information that Harrer did not include in his book, about his leaving his wife pregnant in 1939 and becoming a member of the SA in 1933 and the SS in 1938. In May 1997 Gerald Lehner revealed in "Stern", a German tabloid, the contents of the SS section 38, #73896 folder. The publication of this discovery came early enough that modifications could have been made to Columbia's "Seven Years in Tibet" before the movie's release on October 10, 1997, since the movie originally gave little indication of Harrer's Nazi activities. Further research by Gerald Lehner has resulted in a later article in "Profil" that details the postwar relationship between Harrer and the leaders of the SS expedition to Lhasa of 1939. During his long stay in Lhasa Heinrich Harrer had only one link with Europe: Sven Hedin, the legendary author of "Discoveries and Adventures in Tibet." Both men were after all geographers, Nazi supporters and friends of the Tibetan people. The letters have been kept in the National Archives of Sweden and I would think that they may give clues about the ideological background of the prominent explorers of Tibet.

Rated PG-13 for war violence and mature themes, "Seven Years in Tibet" is still being shown in a few European movie theaters, such as the Rigoletto on Kungsgatan avenue, Stockholm. Heinrich Harrer, who has written nineteen other books, in 1992 opened a museum in Huttenberg, Austria. He has lived for years in Mauren, in the mountainous Principality of Liechtenstein where the real Shangri-La is located.

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