

(Maurice Bowra to Felix Frankfurter)

From the Warden

Wadham College, Oxford

1st November, 1963

Dear Felix,

Thank you very much indeed for your letter about our beloved Eka. I ought to have written to you long ago about it, but assumed that you would know. He died very happily and like himself. He had dined out, been very gay and amusing, was taken home by his old pupil Ralph Giese, entered the house as Giese left and must have fallen down dead at once. He knew that the end might come at any moment and this was just the way he hoped that it would come. It makes me all the [more] glad that I went to see him in June and spent three full and happy days with him, talking about everything under the sun. He had known for long that he could never recover and might go off at any moment, but he made jokes about it and said it was much better than going slowly gaga. I still can't believe that he is dead and keep on thinking of things that would amuse him, only to realise that he is not there to be amused. As you know, I was extremely fond of him, and though I did not see him a great deal, we kept up a voluminous correspondence in which no holds were barred and which has rightly been destroyed at his orders as being much too libellous and indecent for other ears. Then of course he used to come to Europe and we used to pass extremely enjoyable times on various Greek islands. He had a wonderful gift for life – courage on an enormous scale, against the Nazis, against the Regents at Berkeley, against tyrants and bullies everywhere. He was of course wonderfully well read, but he never made a parade of it and was not in the least proud of it. Above all he was a true critic of life, noticing everything and knowing what mattered, from poetry to politics, and wonderful company in all places, with an extraordinary gift for getting on with every kind of person. My own debt to him is incalculable. He stirred my intelligence, bolstered my morale, amused me with his dazzling paradoxes and intuitions and formulations. It was these qualities, in addition to his learning, that made him so good a teacher. Although medieval history is not a very American subject, he created his own school and his pupils have all done very well in quite different ways. They were all devoted to him, and poor Giese was deeply distressed by his death. He

broadened their minds and set their imaginations to work without their noticing it, and of course he knew all the details of their private lives and saved them from being too pompous about them. Though he seldom spoke of his early life, he was proud of being transferred from Turkey to Verdun for having an affair with the mistress of Liman von Sandars [sic] and incurring an entry on his record that he was unfit to be employed in Eastern Europe. You knew of course that his mother died in a concentration camp. He had always been angelic to her, and this was something that he could never speak of. The poor old lady tried to escape over the frontier and was caught. My friendship with him began in 1934 at lunch with Isaiah [Berlin] at All Souls, and we talked literary matters, and I saw that this was someone very much worth knowing. He had a very full, productive and happy life, and had a wonderful gift for surmounting troubles with high spirits and a good deal of mockery. He never yielded to the Nazis on a single point and was furious that they took up his book on Frederick II – he never liked the book again after that. The parochial mediaevalists, like [Frederick Maurice] Powicke and Co., never saw how good he was, especially as he was not a Methodist-turned-pseudo-Catholic like them. But he did not mind. Here Ernest Jacob and Austin Poole saw his worth and were both very fond of him. Alas, there is nothing to be done, but he is part of our lives, and that is something to be very thankful for.

I hope to see you in January. In the meanwhile my love to you both, and thank you very much indeed for writing.

yours/ Maurice [signed]