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Graham, Kay, contribution to 'An American Remembrance' of Isaiah Berlin held at the British Embassy in Washington on 28 January 1998

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*Tribute by Katharine Graham*

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How lucky to have any sort of friendship – continuous, intimate, joyous, and invigorating from beginning to end – for 56 years, much less to have that relationship with Isaiah Berlin.

It started in Joe Alsop's garden one morning at breakfast in the summer of 1941. My principal memory is of Isaiah's pants, hastily pulled on, at the bottom of which his pyjamas showed.

A friendship started immediately among Joe and Isaiah, and Phil and me. It later included many others, but the principals in the beginning, besides us four, were Ben Cohen of the famous Corcoran and Cohen team, then under Roosevelt; Edward Prichard, known as Prich, Phil's brilliant and funny and fat Harvard Law School friend; Felix Frankfurter (for whom Phil was then clerking at the Supreme Court and Prich had clerked the year before), and Felix's wife Marion.

Our friendship was carried on in both the United States and England, in person and by mail. Luckily some of Isaiah's letters were dictated and then typed. Most of the others, the handwritten ones, are as indecipherable as his speech was hard to understand.

The Frankfurters met and befriended Isaiah when they spent a year's sabbatical from the Harvard Law School at Oxford. When Marion learned that Isaiah would be coming to New York in 1940, she told him: 'Shiah, when you come to the United States, you will have to speak more slowly or people will not understand you.'

'Yes, I know, I know, I know,' responded Isaiah, 'but if I did, I should be quite a different person, quite a different person.'

That was absolutely true – his rapid speech was part of who Isaiah was. He will be increasingly hard to describe as time goes by because his magnificent personality was so unique. How could this man, an immigrant from Latvia, become a great English philosopher, thinker, a ground-breaking mind, an artist of prose surpassing those in his adopted country?

At the same time, he was modest to the point where he never published his work. It was left to his colleague, Henry Hardy, to publish volume after volume for him.

Isaiah's friends stretched from scholars at Oxford to great musicians, poets, writers, artists, social figures, royalty, politicians, and several of us here who had quite simply known him for ever and with whom he joked, gossiped, and played games – games such as what people in the New Deal might have been in the Court of Louis XIV.

He once said, 'I wish I could be idle and read nothing but newspapers: I adore gossip about others; when I am mentioned, I die.'

He was loyal to the extreme, but could be ironic or critical. Sometimes his general disapproval of someone changed over the years into either tolerance or enthusiasm. 'Well,' he once said of someone he had criticised in the past, 'the one issue on which he's absolutely reliable is Israel.'

In a letter from Harvard, where he was teaching briefly some years later, Isaiah wrote: I don't believe, I say sadly, that anything will ever replace 1941-5 as an enormous last oasis as far as I am concerned, after which youth is finally over and ordinary life begins.'

'Those American friendships were wonderful,' Isaiah later told me. 'We had a very good time. I never felt so free in my life. I felt absolutely in my element ... I wasn't an imported foreigner somehow. I was one of the boys and that worked very well.'

Isaiah's world of friends broadened to include, in Washington, besides Arthur Schlesinger, Chip and Avis Bohlen, Margaret and John Walker (director of the National Gallery), Joe Alsop's brother, Stew, and his wife Tish, and others.

We all thought of Isaiah – a single man and our particular friend – as our possession. So we were initially put out when he told us Aline had come into his life and he was bringing her over to meet us.

We couldn't imagine this would work. She must be an intruder. Then she appeared: stylish, intelligent and athletic, the golf champion of France, an aristocrat in the best sense of the word. In no time we thought of Isaiah and Aline as one.

It was unimaginably perfect. The beautiful house, perfectly decorated and run, but always somehow right for Oxford and the other don friends.

Aline shared Isaiah's interests, but was her own person at the same time. She became our friend separately as well as together. She lived with him in Oxford, London and Italy. She went around the world on their travels, sharing his intellectual interests, his humor, his gossip, and quietly seeing to his comforts. She was his companion in every way and, at the same time, created the scaffolding which enabled him to function well and perform at his best.

Somewhere along the line, of course, incredibly, Isaiah was knighted. He was pleased, in an embarrassed way, and sort of laughed it off by saying he felt like a child at a birthday party wearing a paper hat. He later quietly rejected becoming a lord. That was really too much.

The Berlins' visits here never ceased to occur with some regularity. And many of us went there and always spent time in Headington House, which, like Isaiah and Aline, astoundingly never changed. There was a huge clamour to see them when they came here, because so many people loved and admired them.

In a 1959 letter from Oxford, Isaiah says whom he wants to see on his upcoming visit. He wrote: 'This opens the way to a whole classification of (a) persons one wishes to see but does not mind not seeing, (b) persons one wishes to see and minds very strongly not seeing, (c)

persons one does not wish to see and minds very strongly seeing, (d) persons who one does not wish to see but minds very strongly not seeing, etc., etc., etc. ... these are our cards and we place them on the table.'

Later in that letter he admitted to having 'taken to tranquillisers in a big way', saying 'they assuage my guilt quite considerably these days. Flying aeroplanes and getting into the wrong relationship with persons – that is what worries me most, tranquilliser quite good against both'.

Before a late-1959 trip, Isaiah wrote that he was to address 3,000 historians in Evanston, Illinois. Then he and Aline would come East and, he wrote, 'I shall try and get in touch as soon as humanly possible.' As Diana Cooper once said to him, he went on, 'when you arrive in Paris first the Loo: then telephone me'.

In the course of discussing the common, often irritable reaction to letters asking for things involving money, Isaiah suddenly said: 'Saints might react differently, but annoyingly enough, they are unlikely to be subject to such letters and, I must confess that I have never wished to be a saint, nor, I suspect, have you: moreover, those who do, disqualify themselves automatically ... We might one day discuss what it is that characterises saints, whether we have ever known any (I am quite clear that I have not, though I could mention some who would be much offended by this observation) ...'.

In 1970, he wrote about going to Italy, where he temporarily acquired arthritis and came home in a wheelchair, about which he said: 'there is no more agreeable method of travel', adding, 'Let me strongly urge this upon you if you can swallow your pride' (which I'm afraid I still can't) '... you acquire a kind of serene detachment from the turmoil around you, and become the object of sympathetic and passionate respectful looks while you peacefully read *The Naked Ape* or whatever it is'.

Isaiah was always involved intellectually with Israel. He went to Jerusalem in 1970 and met with Prime Minister Golda Meir. About her he wrote: 'Mrs Meir is like a mother in Israel, stout hearted, tough, suspicious, her arms akimbo with the air of one who says "We know them, the Gentiles, there is nothing they haven't done to us or are ready to do. We don't trust nobody, we would rather go down fighting than be fooled once again." Yet there is a kind of simple appeal about her which goes to the heart of her fellow citizens, although as a policy it does not seem to me at all productive.'

Some five years after this letter, Isaiah ended another with: 'the longer I live the more passionately convinced I become that personal relations are all in all.'

For the last decade of his life, Isaiah ceased to like travelling. But whenever I went to England, I would spend a weekend with Isaiah and Aline. The last time was in May of 1997, just this past year, and before Isaiah's final illness set in.

I remember him from that visit as absolutely unchanged – vibrant, interested and interesting, full of gossip and fun. He was unusually lucky never to have suffered an old age in which he declined in intellectual and physical strength.

Once the illness did take hold at the very end, Aline reported that Isaiah could no longer do the two things he loved most: reading and talking.

Although he had said on past occasions that he never wanted to die – and most of his friends, certainly including me, still thought of him as in his prime – surely he would not have wished to live without these two things which he found so enjoyable and which gave his myriad friends, who loved him, so much pleasure.