

# The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library

## A FIRE AT HARVARD

*Kay J. Lisle*

From September 1962 till January 1963 IB was Ford Visiting Research Fellow at Harvard, living in Lowell House. Soon after his arrival he caused a fire in his room, as he describes in letters to his stepsons Peter and Philippe Halban (B 116–17, 127). By chance it was at this moment that Kay DeLuca,<sup>1</sup> who had just been appointed as his secretary, first encountered him. In 2019, now Kay J. Lisle, she recalled the experience. She remembers that it was she who extinguished the fire, but in IB's account this role was his.

I was twenty-one years old, newly married and living in Harvard married students' housing. I went to the Harvard Employment Office and was sent to Lowell House to become someone's secretary. Women were not allowed to enter Lowell House then – so I had to be checked in. I remember climbing the stairs to a particular room; hearing shouting, I knocked on the door and a wild-looking man flung the door open and waved at his bed. It was on fire. He was attempting to make a cup of tea with one of those curly implements one sticks into a cup of water. I put the fire out. I couldn't make out much of what he was saying, but he picked up a dictaphone and put it in my arms and showed me the door. Outside was a woman who was mature and may have been more competent. I said, 'I believe I got the job!'

It took a while before I got used to his voice and the speed of his speech on those dictaphone tapes. I believe he was writing

<sup>1</sup> Kay J. Lisle (b. 1940), née Johnson, m. 1960 Louis DeLuca; later taught anthropology at Franklin Pierce College, and served as Dean of Admissions, Colby-Sawyer College.

something on Kerensky. He would ask me to do errands occasionally – like going to Leavitt and Pierce to pick up his cigars. Often when I would return to his room to deliver whatever I had typed he would say: ‘Call Aaron Copeland, call Nathan Milstein, call Leonard Bernstein. Get Arthur Schlesinger on the phone. He wants me to go to the Kennedy White House this weekend.’ Those are the closest words I remember. It was great fun. He would dictate gossipy letters to people at All Souls which were very entertaining.

I attempted to arrange travel to a lecture somewhere in the Midwest. He said he hated to fly. I tried to do as he asked – though I don’t think train travel was very good then. When he arrived back in Cambridge, he raged that they had picked him up in a helicopter!

A small anecdote about an amazing man.

*Here is IB’s account to Peter (5 October 1962):*

The first thing I did was to go to the Harvard Cooperative store where I bought an ingenious electric immersion instrument – the kind of thing that you plug into a hole at one end and where you put the metal end into a cup at the other end and it heats itself and boils coffee or tea or water inside a glass. As you know I am fascinated by gadgets and I acquired this one as soon as I could. I did everything the instructions told me to do at which moment the telephone bell rang in my outer room and I ran to answer it. Presently I began to smell a curious smell to which I paid no attention because I think that my nose is not very sensitive and I never trust it. However, when black clouds began to invade the room I realized that something was up, stopped my telephone conversation, went into the bedroom and discovered my bed a flaming mass with newspapers and books burning merrily and the blanket, the mattress and the sheets as well as a result of some accident – the thing inside the cup of water must have dropped out of it and set fire to everything. All I had was a small cup which I kept pouring on the bed. In the end I extinguished the flames, but the smoke of burned woollen blankets and mattress stuffing is something which I am sure you have no idea of. Black clouds enveloped me and although I opened the window the smoke refused to go out except very slowly. Into this walked the Master of the House – I was very pleased to see him, but my complaints about the room were no longer very real, I was in a morally somewhat weak position to make them. However, he procured me a new mattress, blanket and everything and I was all right.

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*It seems that Philippe then asked him about the fire in a letter, since he writes to him on 25 October:*

Indeed, I set my bedroom on fire. Very remarkable it was – I had never set a fire before and this was a most tremendous blaze which I finally managed to put out with endless glassfuls of cold water. If you have never been in a room in which a blanket, sheets, mattress were [a] wet, smoking, blinding, tear producing mess, you cannot know what it means.

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