

# Introduction

A MEDIEVAL HISTORIAN APPEARS AS A CHARACTER in a German novel of 1960, *Die Rolltreppe* (The Escalator). He is the author of a biography of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II and a member of the esoteric circle around the poet Stefan George. During the First World War he had served in Anatolia on the staff of General Liman von Sanders. One scene in the novel is set in 1928 in an elegant Roman restaurant, “Ranieri.” The director of the Prussian Historical Institute is hosting a dinner for a small group consisting of a museum director, a prominent industrialist, and the noted historian. They dine off baked scampi, breast of turkey with artichokes, red endive salad (“particularly fine for the season”), a cheese soufflé (“specialty of the house”), fruit, and coffee. The courses are accompanied by a Barolo, a Frascati, and an Asti Spumante.<sup>1</sup> The historian, here called “Witkowski,” is transparently Ernst Kantorowicz (pronounced “Kantor-Ovitch”), who did live in Rome in 1928, did patronize the restaurant in question, and did greatly enjoy Rome’s “sensational Frascati bianco.”<sup>2</sup> Later in the novel “Witkowski” appears wearing “a white tropical suit and off-white shirt with a red velvet tie,”<sup>3</sup> and a photo taken in the same period (fig. 1) shows Kantorowicz in similar attire, with the addition of a white bucket hat and white gloves.

Few twentieth-century historians deserve a full-scale biography more than Ernst Kantorowicz (1895–1963) on the basis both of “work” and “life.” More than fifty years after his death Kantorowicz remains one of the most influential of all medieval historians, perhaps the most influential. To be sure, the work of others might count as equally great: the names of Henri Pirenne, Marc Bloch, R. W. Southern, Charles Homer Haskins, and Joseph R. Strayer come to mind. But while their scholarship was pathfinding and while some of their books continue to be read, nothing written by any of them continues to sell as well as Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies*. This book has been kept in print

<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Viga (pseudonym for Friedrich Glum), *Die Rolltreppe* (Munich, 1960), 246–48. Glum, *Zwischen Wissenschaft Wirtschaft und Politik: Erlebtes und Erdachtes aus vier Reichen* (Bonn, 1964), 392, 737, indicates that he met with Kantorowicz for evening discussions during this period and specifies that 90 percent of his novel rested on personal experience or that of acquaintances or friends.

<sup>2</sup>“Rainieri”: Erich Rothacker, *Heitere Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt, 1963), 67; “Frascati bianco”: to Fine von Kahler, 29 August 1928, StGA, Kahler papers, III:6568.

<sup>3</sup>Viga, *Die Rolltreppe*, 393. Here and throughout this book, translations from German are my own.

by Princeton University Press since its first appearance in 1957; it has been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Slovenian, and Japanese. The steady sales and numerous translations reflect the fact that Kantorowicz's book has had extraordinary resonance in several disciplines: not only in history but in art history, literary criticism, and political thought. Fifty years after the book's publication, Stephen Greenblatt wrote that it "remains a remarkably vital, generous, and generative work." Giorgio Agamben has called it "unquestionably a masterpiece" and "one of the great texts of our age on the techniques of power."<sup>4</sup>

Although Kantorowicz's reputation rests primarily on *The King's Two Bodies*, substantial claims can be made for his other works. His first book, published in German in 1927 as *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (Frederick the Second), was one of the most discussed history books in Weimar Germany. Establishment academic historians attacked it because of its alleged "mythical view" of the Hohenstaufen emperor, but others welcomed it as marking a liberation of historiography from positivism. Whereas the book appeared without footnotes, leading many to suppose that the author was inventing things, Kantorowicz embarrassed his critics in 1931 by publishing a "supplementary volume" that documented most of what he had written. Although other biographies of Frederick II have superseded it, the work remains a historiographical monument, and the supplementary volume remains basic for scholarship. ("You don't want to go into thirteenth-century Italian history without your Kantorowicz.")

Then there is *Laudes Regiae*, written over the course of a decade but first published in 1946. Whereas the main methodological claim for the importance of *Friedrich der Zweite* lay in its use of literary sources (poems, prophecies, panegyrics), and that for *The King's Two Bodies* its use of legal sources, the claim for *Laudes Regiae* lies in its use of liturgical sources. As Kantorowicz remarked in his preface, he hoped it soon would no longer be possible for scholars "to deal cheerfully with the history of mediaeval thought and culture without ever opening a missal." *Laudes Regiae* has attracted less attention than the two other books, but it remains important for its substantive contributions to the history of kingship and for its strategies for studying "medieval political theology." Finally one cannot neglect to mention Kantorowicz's articles, many of which are scholarly gems ("cabinet display pieces"). Lynn White once sent him thanks for one of these: "This is certainly one of the most extraordinary feats of contemporary scholarship. I am proud to know you!"<sup>5</sup>

Among Kantorowicz's distinctive traits was his versatility. One might imagine showing his collected articles to a group of beginning students without revealing his name and asking them to identify the author's specialty. Some

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Greenblatt, "Fifty Years of *The King's Two Bodies*," *Representations* 106 (Spring 2009), 63; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: le pouvoir souverain et la vie nu* (Paris, 1997), 101–2.

<sup>5</sup>Lynn White, Jr., to Kantorowicz, 3 January 1944: LBI, box 7, folder 5.

might say he was an art historian, others that he was a theologian with extensive knowledge of canon law, others that his fascination with the derivation of words points to a philologist. Ultimately they might conclude that the author's vast knowledge of patristics and Byzantine history, medieval philosophy, and medieval literature revealed him to be a broad-gauged medievalist. But then they would be in for a surprise if told that this particular medievalist had never taken a course in medieval history.

All this said, the lives of scholars are seldom stuff for engrossing reading. "Stay close to your desk and you may be the winner of an endowed chair." Yet the life of Ernst Kantorowicz is an exception. Born of a wealthy Jewish liqueur manufacturing family in Posen (now Poznań), in his early career Kantorowicz was an ardent German nationalist. He volunteered to fight for the Kaiser in the First World War, winning an Iron Cross for his service on the western front (he was wounded during "the hell at Verdun"), and an Iron Crescent from the Ottoman Empire for his service in Anatolia. At war's end he took up arms three times in the space of a few months: against the Poles in his native city, against the Spartacists in Berlin, and against the "reds" of the short-lived Soviet Republic in Munich. Supposedly Kantorowicz said in the postwar period "right of me is only the wall"; in 1922 he wrote that German policy should be dedicated to the destruction of France. Closely connected to his politics was his membership in the elitist circle of the German poet-prophet Stefan George. Widely considered at the time to be Germany's greatest living poet, George was a riveting cult figure who espoused antirationism, antimodernism, hero-worship, and faith in the country's subterranean resources (the "Secret Germany"). George dedicated himself to grooming a coterie of handsome and clever young men: they were expected to address him in the third person, hang on his every word, and propagate his ideals by their writings and example. The goal was to transform Germany into a land of truth and purity. Kantorowicz was one of the most prominent "youths" in the George circle (another was Claus von Stauffenberg, later Hitler's near assassin), and he wrote his biography of Frederick II with the "Meister's" encouragement.

After the Nazis took power Kantorowicz spoke against them courageously as a full professor from the lecture platform to an overflowing crowd in Frankfurt in November 1933. (This may have been the only time that a German professor expressed himself publicly against the regime.) Unable to continue teaching because of Nazi student boycotts, he was forced to "retire" and become a private scholar. In 1938 he barely escaped Kristallnacht and fled first to England and then the United States, where in the fall of 1939 he took a one-year position at Berkeley. This was succeeded by further interim appointments there until 1945, when he finally gained a full professorship. He would have been happy to stay in Berkeley for the remainder of his career, but the loyalty oath controversy at the university prevented that. Kantorowicz, of course never a communist, immediately became a leader of faculty opposition to the oath and remained

a stalwart “nonsigner” until he was fired in August 1950. Then he “fell up the ladder” by an appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where he pursued his scholarly interests while maintaining friendships with a considerable number of the most noted intellectuals of his day.

Kantorowicz had a fascinating personality. He was urbane and witty (and sometimes nasty). He was a natty dresser, a noted wine connoisseur, and a flamboyant cook. He flourished at night and resented being called in the morning before ten. From 1934 until his death his closest friend was the Oxford don Maurice Bowra, widely thought to have been the wittiest man in Oxford. The two traveled together through Europe in the mid-1930s and summered together in Greece in the 1950s. Other friends included a roll call of Weimar intellectuals and Institute notables. Kantorowicz was a brilliant lecturer and a renowned teacher at Berkeley. He could be seen on campus surrounded by one group of students, who delivered him to another group, who then escorted him further. He had girlfriends and boyfriends. He was transferred out of the German Fifth Army in Turkey because of an affair with the mistress of the commanding general. In the early 1920s he had affairs successively with the wife of one his good friends and an aristocratic young man in the George circle. Shortly afterward he entered into a relationship with the half-sister of the young aristocrat, and then he and Bowra became lovers. In the United States he had a long-term intimate relationship with his first cousin.

Hitherto there has not been an adequate biography.<sup>6</sup> Among the reasons are that one needs fluency in German and English, and familiarity with the respective German and English scenes. Furthermore, the enormous documentation in two languages is intimidating. Kantorowicz often said that he was “Schreibfaul,” a lazy letter writer. Yet something on the order of fifteen hundred outgoing letters are known to survive. (I have located two hundred letters in private hands that were donated to me in originals or copies, and which I refer to for the purposes of this book as being in the “Lerner archive.”) In addition come many surviving incoming letters, perhaps five hundred. Kantorowicz gave instructions in his will that his executor “gather all [his] letters and correspondence and burn them,” but this mandate was discreetly ignored. His close relatives who had the authority to review the letters that lay in his possession did destroy two sets, letters written by his one-time lover, Lucy von Wangenheim, and letters written by Maurice Bowra. But the widow of another close friend,

<sup>6</sup>Eckhart Grünewald, *Ernst Kantorowicz und Stefan George* (Wiesbaden, 1982), is superb but has been rendered somewhat outdated by the subsequent discovery of many new sources and is limited to Kantorowicz’s life up to 1938; Alain Boureau, *Histoires d’un historien: Kantorowicz* (Paris, 1990) (translated as *Kantorowicz: Stories of a Historian* [Baltimore, 2001]), is a slight assemblage of “stories”; Adelaide D’Auria, *La vicenda umana e intellettuale di Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz* (Rome, 2013), is the work of someone who apparently cannot read German; and Janus Gudian, *Ernst Kantorowicz: der “ganze Mensch” und die Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt, 2014), is reliable but short and sketchy.

Leonardo Olschki, was allowed to retrieve a large number of her husband's letters, so that a nearly complete exchange is now available. Similarly, a graduate student, Robert Benson, saved his carbons together with the letters he received, allowing for the existence of another set. Not least, Kantorowicz himself saved numerous incoming letters, mostly of an official nature, which recently have made been made accessible digitally by the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.

The documentation does not stop there by any measure. Kantorowicz's unpublished scholarly writings, handwritten addendums to his published articles, and many complete texts of his undergraduate lectures at Berkeley are all available in the Baeck Institute (and also digitally). Since he was a fascinating personality he often was mentioned in other people's letters and memoirs. The documentation is so thick that it can be reported with certainty that a lunch Kantorowicz once ordered on September 27, 1957, while he was in a hospital in Philadelphia, consisted of soup, beef brisket with horseradish sauce, mashed potatoes, brown bread and butter, fruit, and coffee with cream. (The patient skipped the broccoli and baked squash.) In 1938, after a flurry of correspondence regarding the Munich crisis, he wrote jocularly to Bowra that their "future biographers" would be grateful for the documentation.<sup>7</sup> This is no longer so funny.

It goes without saying that no end of documentation can ever allow full entry into a subject's mind. In Kantorowicz's case a fundamental question is why he turned from being the author of a highly rhetorical, politically charged biography written for a large audience in the grand style without footnotes into being the author of a methodical, distanced analysis of a political theology ("the cold searchlight of fact and reason") rammed with footnotes and designed for a small scholarly audience. Similarly, why did he move from the right of Hindenburg to the left of Kennedy? One can document steps on the way but to account for motives is hazardous. This book follows a rather strict chronology for the purpose of seeing its subject's development and also to note continuities as well as changes. As for motives, it does the best it can.

People ask whether I was a student of Ernst Kantorowicz, but I was not. In April 1961, when I was a first-year graduate student at Princeton in medieval history, my professor, Joseph Strayer, hosted a faculty cocktail party to which graduate students were invited. I can hardly say that I felt as if I belonged: I had recently turned twenty-one. But there I was, talking with Strayer, who soon was joined by the noted French historian on the faculty, R. R. Palmer. The two came to discuss plans for a meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, soon to be held in Princeton, and although I had nothing to contribute they did not seem to mind my presence. Then another guest entered the room and strode over to Strayer and Palmer. I had no idea who he was, but his presence announced "great man." I had never seen anyone like this. His natty tailoring,

<sup>7</sup>Bowra papers, 1 October 1938.

replete with vest-pocket flair, suggested Savile Row, perhaps Beau Brummell. I had never heard such remarkable speech: a weird sing-song that communicated a message that “nobody else speaks like me.” Next to Strayer and Palmer this person seemed to have arrived from a different world, for their suits were drab and their speech was flat. Yet all three were jovial with each other, and the team of two and party of one knew how to poke fun at each other’s habits. The third man wished know when a protégé of his was scheduled to speak at the upcoming meeting since he wanted to be there. When Palmer announced that the student was slotted for a morning session, the third man expostulated that such was entirely out of the question, for, as the other two well knew, he lived according to the maxim that dawn was the time when men of clear reason retire to bed. Palmer and Strayer played it straight, proposing that the night owl must suffer. After several volleys, with an outcome I do not remember, the group dispersed, as people do at cocktail parties. As for me, I located a more advanced graduate student to inquire who the great man was. The answer was: “Ernst Kantorowicz.”

The incident marked the beginning of a fascination that grew when I read *The King’s Two Bodies* and when I learned that Kantorowicz had been a member of the bizarre circle around the poet Stefan George. And it grew still more after I was in his house for an hour or two. By the time of Kantorowicz’s death in September 1963 I had come to know Ralph Giesey, the protégé who had been the subject of the conversation at Strayer’s party. Ralph was one of the two literary executors of Kantorowicz’s will and was on the scene since he was then on leave at the Princeton Institute. Somewhat earlier Strayer had passed along to Kantorowicz a paper I had written in order to see what he thought of it, so I asked Ralph whether he had ever noticed it among Kantorowicz’s belongings. (I was curious as to whether he had scribbled any comments.) No, he hadn’t, but he had a key to the house and I could come over with him and look around. I did not find the paper but there was compensation. After we left, we drank a bottle of Kantorowicz’s Rhine wine, for Ralph had inherited the famous cellar and was opening bottles that would not keep.

Ernst Kantorowicz’s life and work became an ambitious research project for me in 1988. In the fall of that year I was asked to participate in a conference on “German-Speaking Refugee Historians in the United States after 1933” to mark the opening of the German Historical Institute in Washington. Because my assignment was to speak on prominent medievalists, I decided to choose Kantorowicz. Coincidentally in that academic year I was holding a membership at the Princeton Institute, and accordingly I was able to talk with a considerable number of local eminences who had known Kantorowicz well. That did it. After I gave my Washington lecture I resolved to gather materials “toward a biography.” Around that time I came to thinking of Kantorowicz as “EKa” (from the German for his initials and pronounced to rhyme with “Hey, Ma”) because that was the way he asked to be called by his friends. I follow that usage here. One

might say then that I have been working at this biography for twenty-five years, but that is not entirely true because I began the actual work of writing four years ago. But because EKa was someone who “combined depth of mind with abundance of spirit” (I borrow the phrase from his friend Felix Frankfurter<sup>8</sup>), the long engagement has never ceased to be rewarding.

<sup>8</sup>Felix Frankfurter to Murray Gartner, 24 May 1950: LBI, box 6, folder 1.