

# Sunday Telegraph Magazine

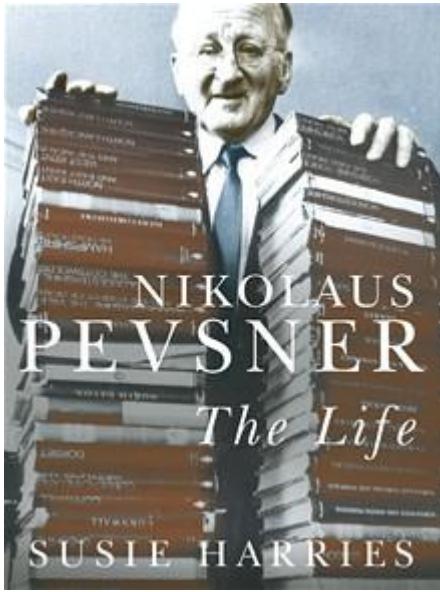
## August 9, 2011-08-11

### Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life by Susie Harries: review

A biography of the industrious champion of British architecture

By Philippa Stockley

11:00AM BST 09 Aug 2011



'A second-hand compiler of inventories' was how Nikolaus Pevsner once described himself, with the economy, modesty and dry wit that would later characterise his inventive and sometimes addictively naughty writing style, adding, "I have no creative genius whatsoever."

Yet his legacy, which includes the 46-volume *Buildings of England* county-by-county architectural guides, never out of print since completion in 1974 and generally referred to simply as "Pevsner", tells a different story: of a socially minded, brilliant achiever who, in 1933, sacked from his art history professorship, left Nazi Germany to build a prodigious career, in which he was both knighted and lauded, in England.

Given unprecedented access to notebooks and letters, Harries's book packs 81 years into 800 pages that engross and sometimes amuse, whose unavoidable conclusion is that her subject had such a unique creative genius that those who have never read any Pevsner will want to immediately.

He was born Nikolai Pevsner in 1902, to a Leipzig fur-trader father, Hugo Pevsner, and an intellectually frustrated mother, Annie Perlmann. By adolescence the gangling, book-bound, quadrilingual boy despised his mother for being overdressed – "a revolting sight" – and himself for having "thin legs, flat feet, ears dirty". This self-referring angst appears to have been characteristic. As his older brother, Heinz, shrewdly remarked, it symptomised a "kind of piety towards oneself".

Nor did Pevsner want to be Jewish; he called himself an anti-Semite. Baptised in 1921, he was attracted to blondes. At 14, however, he spotted the brunette Lola, who would become his wife until her death. This did not stop infatuations with ever younger girls that, grimacingly, he wrote to Lola about.

Young Pevsner decided to become an art historian. A highly academic discipline in Germany, the route to a professorship involved years of unpaid assistant work, which he undertook. He embraced the German notions of *Kulturgeschichte*, an organic cultural evolution including art history; and *Volkgeist* – the spirit of the nation. He stated that art for art's sake was pointless and that artists, designers and architects had social and moral responsibilities which, this biography shows, he strove for in his own life. He stated that his ambition was to give people the facts so that they could judge for themselves, a technique that made him an outstanding educator.

But some of his robustly phrased early opinions caused some critics to align him with Nazism – in which he saw “much that is Puritan and moral”. His belief that artists should serve the state may have added to this interpretation. Pevsner had a habit of expressing himself with great precision, even when it might have been more diplomatic to soften or leave certain views unsaid. Hating dissimulation, he insisted on clarity of statement and description. Throughout his career, such straightforwardness could occasionally cause offence that perplexed him.

Harries charts the inexorable cranking up of the Nazi machine and Pevsner's attempts to ignore it, as did intellectual contemporaries such as Viktor Klemperer. But, in September 1933, he was officially asked to resign from his Göttingen lectureship. He went to England, leaving Lola and their two small children in Germany.

After a rocky start in Birmingham on a refugee's allowance, applying for posts that he saw going to those he considered less qualified, Pevsner began to make slow headway in the academic establishment. It was not easy. Lonely, he struggled on little money. He heard of his mother's suicide, to avoid deportation to a concentration camp. When Lola and their son, Tom, joined him in England, their daughter, Uta, had to be left behind with an aunt.

His solution for depression was to work harder. “Pevsner's defining feature was industriousness,” says Harries. “He had a mind like a filing cabinet,” wrote Peter Lasko. Bent on lasting achievement and social good, his self-imposed workload never let up.

When Pevsner suggested to Allen Lane (Penguin's founder) a series looking at the buildings of Britain, he knew it would take a lifetime. The agreed fee (£900 a year) was low, the workload absurd. Starting with the most far-flung counties, he wrote 32 books himself, rushing from place to place, often spending only minutes in any one building. The anecdotes are often funny; the result, irreplaceable. Alongside this, he edited the Pelican History of Art, wrote now-classic books such as *Pioneers of Modern Design*, and thousands of articles, for which the 66-page bibliography is on Harries's website.

Pevsner's detractors, who were plenty and often savage, including the poet John Betjeman, accused him, especially, of bias towards Thirties Modernism; and there is no doubt that Pevsner felt that the style perfectly expressed the *zeitgeist*.

Yet in fact he was instrumental in establishing the listing system and chaired the Victorian Society. His approach to conservation was sympathetic, though not automatic.

Harries is a careful and systematic biographer, rarely intruding when there is so much primary material, which she has corralled splendidly. The man who emerges, once falling off a podium mid-lecture but carrying on talking while clambering back; the man being fed hard-boiled eggs by his smaller mother-hen wife; the man who was said, variously, to resemble a benign spider or a benevolent heron, who did not care a jot for the trappings of success, whose classic account of Lord Byron's home, Newstead Abbey, begins with perfect pith, "*Not an Abbey*", is enormously likeable. As is this book.

Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life

By Susie Harries

866p, Chatto and Windus, £30