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BUILDINGSROMAN

NIKOLAUS PEVSNER: THE LIFE

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By Susie Harries
(Chatto & Windus 834pp £30)

NIKOLAUS PEVSNER MEANS only one thing to millions of people: *The Buildings of England*. The series is synonymous with him, or vice versa. Between the late 1940s and the early 1970s Pevsner, later assisted by one or two trusted writers, drove the length and breadth of England trying to spot as many buildings as he could of aesthetic or historical interest (the two were not inevitably the same). He often feared he would die before he completed the task, and he did not keep his health for very long beyond the publication of *Staffordshire*, the final volume. The early volumes were superficial and, by his own admission, not always adequate. By the time of his death, high-class revisions and expansions had made the series widely feted. Now, volumes several times the size of their originals make these definitive works of reference.

What is most remarkable is that Pevsner had to work at his affinity with England. He was an assimilated German Jew of Russian heritage who arrived in England in search of work after Hitler came to power. He had converted to Christianity and his children were not even told they were, in the Nazis' eyes, Jewish. One of the more remarkable facts that emerges from this quite superb biography is that he felt, for some time after 1933 and despite his own disadvantaged status under the new regime, a sympathy with Hitler. It was some time before he was able to get Lola, his half-Jewish wife, and their three children out of Germany to join him in England. Lola was never happy in exile, but then Pevsner was never the ideal husband. He was obsessed with his work, and took the occasional less than professional interest in his female students.

He had a naivety about the world outside academia that could very easily have proved lethal, if not for him then for his family. Astonishingly he and Lola decided to send their three children on holiday to Germany with

Lola's sister and her gentile husband in August 1939, when trenches were being dug in London parks and conscription had already been introduced. By near miraculous means the younger two managed to get home. Even more miraculous was the survival throughout the war of Uta, who was fifteen when hostilities commenced and twenty-one when she finally returned home from a displaced persons' camp in the summer of 1945. Her aunt and uncle had moved around Germany in order to conceal her, with the constant risk that the entire family would end up in a concentration camp. It was not until Pevsner, serving as a temporary colonel in the British army after the end of the war, met his sister-in-law in 1947 that he came fully to understand the risks her family had run and the intense danger Uta had been in. The self-obsession of both Pevsner parents seems to have prevented them from worrying too much about their daughter. Susie Harries seems to share the reader's amazement at this complacency, but she suggests that, for the Pevsners, Uta's absence was merely an extended visit to close family and therefore nothing to worry about.

Pevsner's father had been in the fur trade. His brother committed suicide as a troubled youth at the end of the Great War, as his widowed mother would when, early in 1942, she feared the Gestapo were about to come for her. Pevsner first met Lola when they were both fourteen. They married in their early twenties and Uta was born shortly afterwards. Pevsner had a conventional career as an academic at Göttingen during the Weimar Republic, and was sketching out a career plan when the coming of the Nazis ended his life in Germany. On arrival in England, he wished not to be considered a refugee, and certainly did not identify with many of the Jews who had fled persecution.

Denied the communal support that was offered to practising Jews, he had to make his own way. This was slow and often painful. He eventually found work doing a national survey of industrial design, on which he became an expert, and it led to him castigating the vile taste of the inhabitants of his adopted country. But the coming of war brought an end to this, and he struggled to find the academic work he craved. In time he was interned. It was not for long, yet it put perhaps the worst of many strains upon his and Lola's marriage, as she was left to fend for herself and their children. In 1940–41 his main work, which he

said was good for him, was clearing rubble on bomb sites. It was shortly after this that he composed his breakthrough work, *An Outline of European Architecture*. Thereafter, he began to find work as a broadcaster, editor, writer and part-time academic, though nothing was more fruitful in his life than a meeting with Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books. Out of this came the Pelican History of Art, Pevsner's editorship of the King Penguin series, and, of course, *The Buildings of England*.

Harries tells the story of that forty-six-volume marathon with pace, humour and often grim detail. Allen Lane ensured that Pevsner did the work for the barest minimum of remuneration. Penguin lent him an ancient car (which often required a mechanic to start it) and paid for his petrol, but gave him hardly anything for subsistence. For the twenty or more years that Pevsner made his journeys around the English counties (driven by Lola until her death in 1963), he put up in pubs and lived a far from glamorous existence. Yet the project was one that brought him and Lola closer together and, although she died two-thirds of the way through, it would not have been possible without her.

Each county was visited in just four weeks, with Pevsner sticking to a strict timetable. He would not make appointments to see houses in case the owners wished to invite him to lunches or teas that would upset his schedule. He therefore often caused offence, put noses out of joint, or simply found himself refused entry. He did, though, become a master of the surreptitious entry, charming his way past butlers to look at staircases and ceilings. He would write up his entries on tiny writing tables in ill-lit pub bedrooms each night before embarking on the next day's inspections. An army of research assistants, usually fragrant young women who had just graduated from the Courtauld, would do all the preparation for him. He would do one county at Easter and another in late summer, attempting to keep his promise to Lane to produce two volumes a year. To have produced these works in such a short time is remarkable, but Pevsner had so many other things to do that devoting more than two months of the year to field work was simply impossible.

Some of the volumes attracted criticism, partly because of their perceived superficiality, partly because of some of the prejudices expressed in them. Although Pevsner would later become a pillar of the Victorian Society, he was no lover of Victorian architecture, and architects such as S S Teulon sent him into paroxysms. Ninian Comper, from a later generation, had the same effect. This was part of the reason why John Betjeman took against him. One

of the most riveting parts of a compelling book is Harries's chapter on their feud, if a battle in which only one side – Betjeman – seems to be belligerent can be termed a feud. Harries makes a convincing case that Betjeman's rancour was provoked by his own sense of intellectual inferiority and his jealousy at Pevsner's securing positions – such as the editorship of the *Architectural Review* – that Betjeman felt should be his.

Pevsner had been heavily influenced by the Bauhaus movement and remained an apostle for modernism throughout his career. His appreciation of it was a very German trait that alienated him from those who prized Englishness in architecture; and they were more numerous than just Betjeman. Although Pevsner did not go around seeking confrontations, he attracted them. He was always the outsider, even when the establishment eventually embraced him. Harries is especially good on the turn against him by David Watkin, one of his pupils who later became a professor of architecture at Cambridge, who she suggests went for Pevsner for reasons that had more to do with politics than with aesthetics.

After his slow start in England, Pevsner not only achieved more than most British art historians could ever hope to do but had honours heaped upon him. As well as a cascade of honorary doctorates, invitations to lecture, gold medals and Festschriften, he was knighted in 1969, in the same honours list as Betjeman. His widowhood, the onset of Parkinson's disease and a stroke that robbed him of part of his mental capacity made for a sad old age, though he was surrounded to the end by a devoted family – one of his sons, Tom, was an assistant director at Ealing and

ended up producing some of the James Bond films. What Harries gives us, in this stunningly good book, is a very human picture of a rather phenomenal man. We have him blubbing with misery in the early years of his exile; walking miles in his impoverishment before the war to save on transport fares; being bemused by some of the intemperate attacks on him by various exhibitionists and lunatics; and urinating on a church wall during an afternoon inspection for *The Buildings of England*. Although he destroyed most of the *Hefstchen* (the little notebooks in which he confided his most private thoughts), enough survive to show us his complexity. Harries successfully makes the case that he was fundamentally a great man. With her access to and judicious use of Pevsner's private papers, and her extensive interviews with his friends and enemies, Susie Harries has produced one of the finest biographies I have read for years.

To order this book for £24, see LR bookshop on page 12



Pevsner: stately, homeless