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NIKOLAUS PEVSNER: The Life
by SUSIE HARRIES
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Why does the life of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, who died 28 years ago, continue to exercise such a fascination? His greatest achievement, the constantly updated Buildings of England county series with their later Welsh, Scottish and Irish equivalents, sells in relatively small numbers, yet the books are taken as holy writ by many. If a building gets a good mention "in Pevsner", few dispute that it is significant. By the end of his life he had become enormously influential, too much so perhaps. Buildings were saved or demolished according to his opinion. But today?

Part of his fascination is that more keeps emerging on his life as a high-profile refugee on the political faultlines of the 20th century. As Susie Harries's mammoth biography – 20 years in the making – makes clear, Pevsner was permanently running to stay still. Always a staggeringly hard worker, always ambitious in his chosen career as an art historian, he was on the point of breaking through to the academic big time in his homeland of Germany, with a young family to support, when the Nazi regime put paid to all that. The Pevsner family was Russian-Jewish, his father a fur trader, though as early as 1921 Nikolaus (originally Nikolai Pevsner) had converted to Lutheran Christianity. The Nazis forbade Jews to hold academic posts, and by 1935 he had been driven from his job and, at first separated from his family, was looking for work in England. That was hard, but he was starting to make headway when war broke out. Interned, then released, he had to begin yet again. At his lowest, he was even grateful for a job clearing London's bomb rubble. But by 1946 he was back in Germany – a British national in the unlikely uniform of a British colonel, on a fact-finding mission among a starving population.

Assimilation was always the goal for Pevsner. He had wanted so badly to be authentically German that he had even supported



Blending in: assimilation was the goal for Nikolaus Pevsner

The hard road to fame

Nikolaus Pevsner had to struggle mightily to make his name

certain aspects of the Nazi cultural agenda: as late as 1935 he was writing in support of Nazi-condoned propagandist art. After the turmoil and hyperinflation of the Weimar period, Pevsner was a conservative German to say the least – though not in his architectural tastes, which always inclined to modernism. And then he had to try to fit into a Britain that at first he disliked. He looked strange, with his knickerbockers and wire-rimmed glasses. He worked hard to master the language and the humour – though, as Harries relates, he never got to grips with the easy facetiousness of the British academic community or the aristocracy. Self-deprecation was the best he could manage there.

He stuck it out, made his name, persuaded Allen Lane of Penguin Books to fund the incredibly ambitious (and desperately underresourced) Buildings of England series in the post-war years, and finally got his knighthood. He had loyal British supporters, but to his critics – John Betjeman was a sparring partner – he would forever

be the overefficient, pigeonholing Prussian. By the end of his life he was accused by a backlash of right-wing British art historians of being more or less a communist sympathiser because of his modernist position. But he was also a noted conservationist, chairing the Victorian Society for years.

All this is known well enough. What Harries brings to the table is the most intimate portrait of Pevsner yet, having had access to his previously jealously guarded private papers, including his personal diaries. So now we have chapter and verse on his early love life (his fiancée, Lola, was indeed pregnant before marriage), though on details of his various amours, usually with keen young female students, things get a bit vague because Pevsner destroyed some of the diaries. Harries thinks these amounted to little more than crushes, but that didn't stop Lola marching off in a strop on more than one occasion, and having a fling with a mutual friend herself.

There was also tragedy and guilt.

Pevsner's elder brother and mother both committed suicide, in the latter case while being hounded as a Jew in wartime Leipzig. His daughter Uta found herself stuck in Hanover when war broke out and had to be sheltered from both British bombs and the Nazi Jew-hunters. She survived. He and Lola had rows but were reconciled and happy when she died unexpectedly, at only 61, when Pevsner was away on holiday in 1963. Harries recounts how one of his assistants later found him sitting motionless at his desk, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I am surrounded by mountains," he wrote in his diary.

Lola had been his companion and organiser for many of the intense research trips for The Buildings of England – 46 books in all, produced over 23 years, the bulk of the work by Pevsner himself. These were not glamorous outings. Bad cheap hotels, unreliable old cars, and Pevsner writing up his notes every night. He continued, and completed the series, but it became harder and harder for him. By the end (he died in 1983, aged 81), he was in the early stages of Parkinson's disease.

Critics of Pevsner often focus on the fact that he was no great academic theorist, rather a dry presenter of fact, and a somewhat selective one at that. His early work – Pioneers of Modern Design, for instance, first published in 1936 and still popular – was his most polemical. Harries defends him against the charge of being a blinkered sanatorium-modernist, however, pointing out that he always acknowledged the power of individual architectural genius. Emphatically he did not want everywhere to look the same. He first used the term "post-modern" in 1956, way before anyone else.

Pevsner couldn't tell jokes readily, but he had a sometimes mischievous wit. Exhausted after the English series, he left Wales, Scotland and Ireland to others. But he toured Ireland, and sent two postcards back to the Irish editor, Alistair Rowan. The first read: "You poor man, what a terrible job." The second, more expansive one was sent 10 days later and read: "You poor, poor man, what a truly terrible job."

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