

The Observer

Pevsner: The Life by Susie Harries – review

A towering account of the German-born scholar who chronicled England's most significant buildings is no more than he deserves

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- George Walden
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Precocious: Nikolaus Pevsner in 1974. Photograph: Topham Picturepoint

"It takes earnestness to make a man and diligence to make a genius," Pevsner noted at 20, and he had plenty of both. He'd started writing historical dramas at seven, and a diary begun in his teens recorded the lifelong anxieties and emotional insecurities that tend to come with precocity of this order.

A Protestant convert, like many of his kind in the early 20th century (his father was a prosperous Russian-Jewish fur trader), he developed an intense patriotism, and in his case quasi-spiritual convictions about the Germanness of German art. For Pevsner, a kind of instinctual, apolitical socialist, national feeling was coupled with a sense of social responsibility, and dislike of the unhealthy values he saw in Weimar Germany.

So it was that in its early days National Socialism held no terrors for him, and he was slow to perceive the devilry of the Nazi creed.

Only when threatened with dismissal from his academic post did he join the flood of émigrés to England, though even then he was still sending his children on German holidays on the brink of war in 1939, and in touch with leading pro-Nazi art historians. His apparent obtuseness, Harries suggests in subtly analytical pages on his supposed fascistic inclinations, was due less to wilful blindness than to a lifelong political innocence and reluctance to cut ties with his homeland.

England proved a shock and, in social terms, a puzzle. Like Soviet Jewish pianists or violinists in Israel in later years, art historical refugees from Hitler were two a penny, and Pevsner endured years of penury and humble work, including as an adviser on household design ("the more art is applied to an article the worse its appearance becomes"), before his ascent to panjandrum status ("Is it in Pevsner?"), and eventual knighthood.

His success came not by social contacts – on the contrary, he was accused of having too few aristocratic acquaintances and of omitting grand country houses from his work for leftwing reasons – but by the manic diligence he was to show in the 23 years it took to compile the 46 volumes of *The Buildings of England*. He was most at home in churches, which he would root about tirelessly, "capital by bloody capital", though not entirely for spiritual reasons: "Really, the uses some people put these places to," he was heard to say when a service in progress obliged him to wait.

Culture clashes with the locals are entertainingly documented. In England art history was often an amateur affair, carried on with nonchalance, effortless superiority and class pretension, a place where folk such as John Betjeman (a modestly born social alpinist aware that his own name was of German origin) smirked about "Herr Doktor Professor", and where the very term *Kunstforschung* – art research – was thought frightfully amusing. "It was partly banter," Pevsner noted, "but not all banter." He was getting to understand the English.

Impressed nonetheless by innovative forms of popularising the arts in museums and lectures, under pressure from the BBC and others, he did his best to lighten the tone of his talks and articles, without succumbing to the personalised approach he found tiresome. Gradually his style, accent and all, found an audience, and numerous outlets, the Reith lectures included.

The feuds that assailed him, chiefly about his early book *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, were one-sided affairs, in which he rarely hit back. Gropius was always his hero, which brought suspicions of continental theorising, inhuman functionalism and dangerous doctrines about the moral responsibilities of artists. He had definite, though unpredictable tastes, hating both brutalism and the flamboyant art deco of the Hoover building, and preferring more humdrum, workaday modern styles.

At the same time he involved himself in conservation battles, as postwar reconstruction, then 60s insouciance, conspired to obliterate outstanding Victorian buildings, and pulling down Covent Garden was seriously considered.

In the Nazi years it was better to be *dépaysé* abroad than in your own country, yet despite his English successes all his professional life you sense in Pevsner a certain homesickness. For us at least the conflict of national intellectual styles he represented was hugely beneficial. The irony of a "Prussian pedant" lecturing the English on Englishness, for which he was mocked, resolves itself in the fact that, together with Gombrich in art history and Weidenfeld in publishing, Pevsner was one of a golden generation of German/Austrian Jewish refugees who did much to give their adopted country the bottom it prided itself on already possessing.

Harries guides us through treacherous territory, of race, class, politics and artistic and intellectual intrigue, in a sure-footed manner. There is empathy with her subject, who had a kindly side (a "benign spider" someone called him), but her judgments are balanced by a cool and compendious intelligence, together with rare explanatory powers.

Intellectual movements, art politics, wartime history, a great man's unsteady emotional life – there is too much in this 800-page book even to evoke here. It is long because it is rich with things to tell and to say. A perfect blend of events, ideas and personal narrative, it is a masterpiece of the biographical genre 20 years in the making. As with much of Pevsner himself, no one, you feel, could have done it better.