

JEWISH CHRONICLE

Nikolaus Pevsner: The life

Behind an icon of art history

By Gerda Mayer, November 3, 2011



Anglophile in an English garden

By Susie Harries

Chatto & Windus, £30

On the dust-jacket of this book, a very elderly head of Nikolaus Pevsner sits aloft two towers of the Buildings of England; they are his own memorial, the vast undertaking that had occupied so many arduous years of his life. Within the book itself, Susie Harries has written a lucid, comprehensive, riveting account both of Pevsner's personal life and that of his ultimately triumphant place in the history of art.

In fact, we meet any number of Pevsners. Pevsner the self-doubting, self-lacerating adolescent, uneasy in his gangly body, unhappy about his Russian-Jewish background and longing to belong to the Germany that was later to cast him out; declaring himself to be an antisemite yet admitting that he fears antisemitism; finally converting to Protestantism; and never in later years (such is human self-delusion) willing to count himself as a genuine refugee. This was a man who had a Yiddisher Grandmamma and a father who never attained German nationality.

Perhaps it is wrong to peer over a young man's shoulder when he is making silly confessions to his diary. And yet, because he was a keen diarist and letter-writer, we do gain insights into his private life. There is the ardent wooing of his future wife, "Lola", when he was 15 and she 14. Later, this would be a lifelong union, not without its stormy side.

Lola was half-Jewish but considered herself thoroughly Prussian and thought it only proper to look down on him. And it was not until the safe post-war England that Pevsner acquainted his children with their Jewish heritage.

More serious, more inexcusable, was Pevsner's attempt to ingratiate himself with the Nazis, to curry favour with them by pointing out how much his outlook on the history of art tallied with theirs.

Years later, Pevsner wrote an obituary of the art historian, Wilhelm Pinder, speaking of "a man who came to see the truth about the Nazis too late, a victim rather than truly a perpetrator". Was he perhaps writing an absolution for himself?

By the end of the war, Pevsner was himself well-established as an art-historian - and in the country of which he had grown genuinely fond: "O soothing, civilised, good-natured England."

Moreover, during the war, he had done rubble-clearing and fire-watching, having been promoted, in his own words, to the roof of Birkbeck College.

Harries points out how much Pevsner wanted to belong. His "Englishness" did not convince everyone; to John Betjeman, he was Herr Doktor Professor. Professionally, he was rather unfairly blamed for every ugly flat-roofed modern building. In the 1950s, Peter Clarke wrote satirical verses about this very German professor - with at least one line having an antisemitic tinge.

Pevsner was perhaps happiest among his students. He was, as I can testify, an inspiring, kind, most approachable teacher. And Susie Harries has written an affectionate, charitable Life.

Pevsner was "A bringer of riches". And, when he was young, he had had ambitions to be an artist. "An artist without talent" - he had feared. "Art History, then? I don't think I have the qualities I might need - and again, no real enthusiasm." He was to change his mind!

Gerda Mayer's books include 'Bernini's Cat' and 'Prague Winter'. She studied under Pevsner between 1960 and 1963 and later worked as his research assistant