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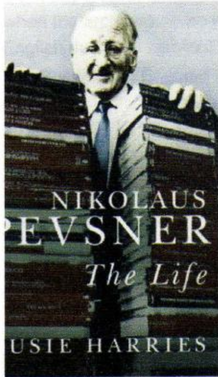

BOOK OF THE YEAR

This towering biography, some 20 years in the making, masterfully reveals the motivations and personality behind the 20th century's most revered architectural historian.

Mark Girouard, Thursday, 1st December 2011

The outstanding achievement of this remarkable biography is that it goes behind the front presented to the world by the renowned Professor Pevsner – formidable for his industry and his knowledge, and kindly indeed, but also dry, pedantic, unemotional and detached – to reveal a human being almost shockingly, but in the end movingly, unlike what one expected. Harries has been able to do this because she has had access to a mass of private papers, above all to his heftchen, the run of diaries, unfortunately incomplete, into which he poured his feelings from the age of 14 until Parkinson's disease incapacitated him in 1974. Praise cannot be too great for the skill and sympathy with which she interweaves these with the record of his professional life.

Pevsner was born in 1902 in Leipzig, into a Jewish family. It was far from a closely knit or rigidly Orthodox one. His father was a Russian immigrant, kindly, uneducated and crude, yet prospering as a fur merchant. His mother was socially superior to her husband, an unfaithful wife, a cold mother, intellectually pretentious, neurotic and dissatisfied. Heinz, the elder of their two children, was worldly, flashy and a woman-iser; but he too was unstable, committing suicide in 1919. The young Nikolaus Pevsner was tall, gangling, clever, clumsy, timid, unattractive to girls, given to fantasy, ashamed of his father, unable to relate to his mother and ambivalent towards his brother, being at once envious and critical of him. In his diary he asked himself what he admired in others and answered: 'Everything that I am not'. He was a very unhappy young man.

Rescue came in two ways, both curiously stemming from the town of Naumburg in east Germany. A converted watch-tower in the vineyard outside Naumburg was the holiday home of the Kurlbaum family. Pevsner stayed there from 1919 onwards, and fell in love with the Kurlbaums and their way of life. Alfred Kurlbaum, a distinguished lawyer and judge, had married a Jewish wife, but the family ethos was that of disciplined and cultured Prussian Lutherans. To Pevsner they offered, as he wrote, 'both closeness and firmness, old-fashioned values but also happiness and consideration' – everything that he found lacking in his own family, just as the modest austerity of their house contrasted similarly with the lush opulence of the Pevsners' apartment in Leipzig. And in Naumburg Cathedral he was entranced by famous 13th-century sculptures, then being hymned by German art historians, including the charismatic Wilhelm Pinder, as the epitome of the true German spirit. Among them, the cloaked figure of Uta was an Aryan pin-up for German nationalists and later, less happily, for the Nazis.

Pevsner became a Lutheran in 1921, married Lola Kurlbaum, Alfred's daughter, in 1923, christened his own daughter Uta in 1924 and adopted Pinder as his hero and art-historical mentor. He severed himself from his Jewish roots with a completeness that is a little troubling to read about. But the next 10 years were probably the happiest in his life as he applied himself with apparent success to becoming a good German and a good German art historian. Then Hitler came. Pevsner and his young

family removed to England in 1933; his parents, however, like so many others, stayed on too late: his father died in 1940, and his mother committed suicide, in anticipation of deportation, in 1942.

Nikolaus Pevsner's life, work and achieve-ments in England were heavily conditioned by his German years. In Germany he had already adopted with passion the concept of the Zeit-geist and the national character as spiritual forces with a life of their own. He had plans for a book to show how they had worked, in England and (especially) Germany, towards a 'style of the 20th century', free of imitation of past styles and produced by architects, artists and craftsmen subordinating their individuality and working for the state or community. Adapted for an English reader-ship, this became his Pioneers of the Modern Movement, published in 1934 to little interest but later expanded and re-issued, in 1949, under the title Pioneers of Modern Design as a best-selling blueprint for post-war Britain. Meanwhile, he had concentrated the results of formidable research and lectures in Germany into An Outline of European Architecture (1943), written with speed and heat while on the job as an air-raid warden, when the architecture he was celebrating was being blown up all around him. Another project of the 1930s, an inventory of English buildings inspired by what Georg Dehio had done for Germany, crystallised from 1950 as his supreme achievement, The Buildings of England (1951–74).

He regulated his own life according to the Protestant ethic of service, austerity, dislike of luxury and glorification of work, which he had absorbed from the Kurlbaums. And still, as in his youth, he neither liked himself nor estimated his abilities very highly, thinking that in the absence of creativity he could at least achieve something by exhaustive work and attention to detail. He also hoped that work would help to control a fantasy life that broke out from time to time in distressing crushes – they never seem to have gone further – on young girls. These were no fun for Lola, an emotional character who already felt shut out by her husband's absorption in his work. Their relationship could be a stormy one: '...she beat me, she scratched me,' he wrote. 'One night she ran out onto the Heath in her nightdress to kill herself.' But Pevsner was devastated when she died, and what he wrote about her then is as moving as Jonathan Swift's tribute to 'Stella'.

The author is least satisfactory when writing on Pevsner and John Betjeman. One can scarcely blame her for her animus against the latter, whose bitchiness about 'Herr Professor-Doktor' is as unforgivable as it is hard to understand, for the two men had much in common. But her animus leads her to underestimate Betjeman, who beyond being a purveyor of atmosphere had a strong feeling for architecture too: the Betjeman/Piper Murrays guides preceded the first Buildings of England volumes and were better than them.

No one was better at picking holes in Pevsner than Pevsner himself, for he was a humble and realistic man. He was not an original thinker. His obsession with hard work harmed his capacity for reflection and enjoyment. The Buildings of England was 'a faulty compilation', but he accepted imperfection as the cost of completing the work. Harries does not play down his weaknesses but goes beyond them to his greatness, to the strong feeling, infused with knowledge, by means of which he got people of all kinds to look at buildings. Yet in the end, what makes the biography memorable is her sympathy with Pevsner as a man. o

Mark Girouard is an architectural historian. His book of essays, Enthusiasms, was published in October (Frances Lincoln).

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