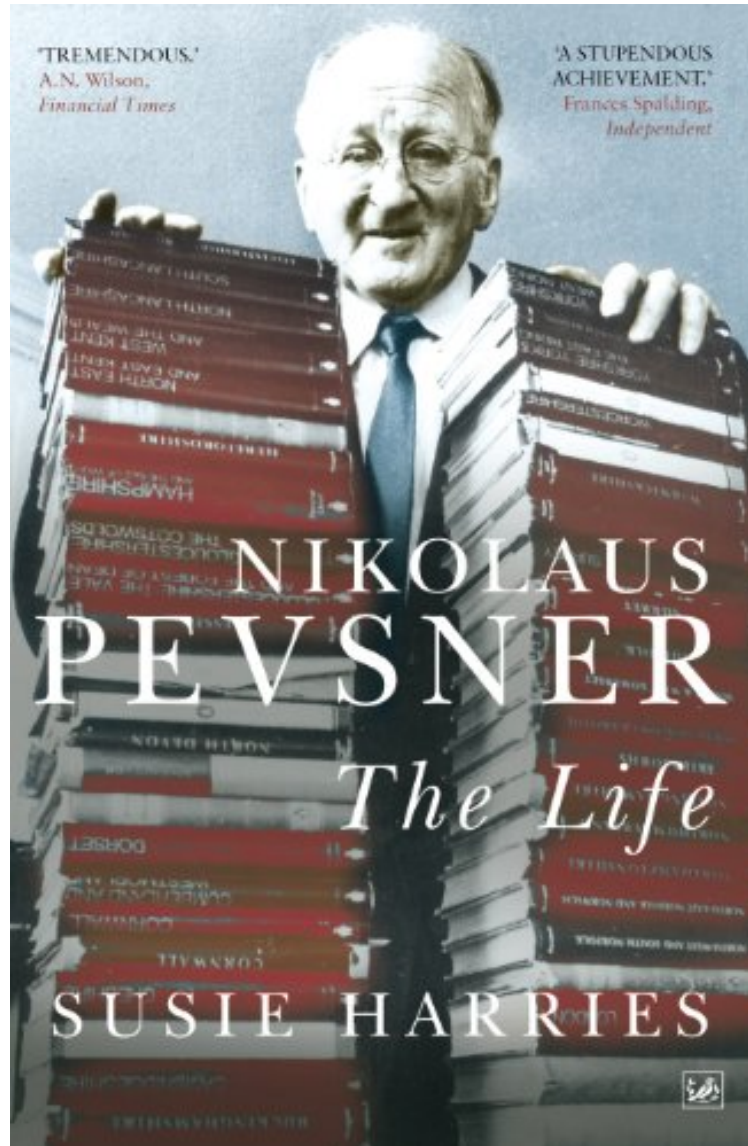


[FREE] Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life (Pimlico)

## Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life (Pimlico)

*Susie Harries*

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**Susie Harries : Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life (Pimlico)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life (Pimlico):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A beautifully written, judicious and balanced biography which was obviously ...By DavidBA fascinating and well written biography, but at 800 pages of text the book could have done with some editing. A beautifully written, judicious and balanced biography which was obviously the result of meticulous research and deep knowledge of both Pevsner and architectural history on the part of the author. The first half of the book is about his Jewish childhood in eastern Germany, his marriage and conversion to Christianity,

followed by his dismissal from his university post in Leipzig at the hands of the Nazis, arrival in England, internment at the start of World War II and struggle to find an academic post. This is an fascinating story with many insights into how Jewish emigres handled their exile. The second half of the book, whose central theme is the writing of the Buildings of England series is also of interest, but less compelling. I have no problem with long books, and the story of Pevsner's life might well merit at least 600 pages, but Harries has too much detail, both in the text and lengthy footnotes. Some of the peripheral accounts of people and events that were not central to Pevsner's life could have been omitted.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Enthralling biography  
By Wayne Dynes  
Recalling Baedeker and Webster, "Pevsner" is an eponym that encapsulates the life work of a major art historian of the 20th century. That work is the multivolume "Buildings of England." The original series of the guides in 46 volumes was published between 1951 and 1975. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner wrote 32 of the books himself and produced ten with collaborators, with a further four of the original series farmed out to others. Eventually the scope of the series expanded to include Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Now known as the Pevsner Architectural Guides, they are published by the Yale University Press and available individually on .com.

Nikolaus Pevsner was born in Leipzig in 1902 to Jewish parents. Trained in the strict canons of art history then prevailing in Germany, he took up an academic post, only to be summarily dismissed by the Nazis in 1933. Since he had some acquaintance with the art of England, he decided to resettle in that country. It was the middle of the Depression and at that time Britain had virtually no tradition of serious art scholarship. He had to find work where he could, first making a name for himself with his studies of design. These culminated in his first popular success, "Pioneers of the Modern Movement" (1936), a short book that established the basic narrative of the origins of the International Style in architecture.

By dint of careful study of the language and the culture, Pevsner was able to assimilate perfectly (or almost) into English society. He even acquired the English gift for understatement, remarking at one point that "my scholarship has been described as impeccable, but it I really think that it is very peccable."

Nikolaus Pevsner joined two other distinguished emigres from Central Europe, Leslie Howard, the actor, and Lewis Namier, the historian, as people who helped the English define themselves. All the same, his book on the "Englishness of English Art" (1956), originally presented on the BBC as the Reith Lectures, was not a success. Critics said that the methodology was too German. In fact, Pevsner had been influenced by his charismatic but controversial teacher Wilhelm Pinder, a strong proponent of special German qualities in art. Earlier, though, the Bloomsbury writer Roger Fry had written about the distinctive qualities of French art. And contemporary critics like Harold Rosenberg were pushing "American-type painting" (abstract expressionism). So the search for national character in art was a common theme of the period.

For neophyte art historians of fifty years ago, eager to explore the deepest profundities of German Kunstgeschichte, Pevsner appeared to be something of a lightweight. He did not seem to belong to the same league as Ernst Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, and Rudolf Wittkower, for he was concerned with reaching a large public--as they for the most part were not. In fact Pevsner changed the way that several generations viewed buildings: he gave his followers a whole new way of seeing. And as a tenacious advocate of historic preservation, he helped save many fine structures from the wrecking ball. His heritage lives on in Britain--and indeed in the whole Western world.

You can read it all in Susie Harries' extraordinary volume, where the text exceeds 800 pages. Because Pevsner was interested in so many things--from medieval cathedrals and Georgian country houses to Victorian culture and town planning--the book is continuously enthralling.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great biography  
By Scott William  
Enjoyed learning about this man, who before was just a reference. The German Jewish background was fascinating as well as how he could not understand how his family was in danger in Germany. It made me realise how many Germans never understood the extent of the Nazi's intentions towards the Jews. His life work with conservation and art history in England was enjoyable as well.

Born Nikolai Pevsner into a Russian-Jewish family in Leipzig in 1902, Nikolaus Pevsner was a dedicated scholar who pursued a promising career as an academic in Dresden and Göttingen. When, in 1933 Jews were no longer permitted to teach in German universities, he lost his job and looked for employment in England. Here, over a long and amazingly industrious career, he made himself an authority on the exploration and enjoyment of English art and architecture, so much so that his magisterial county-by-county series of 46 books on The Buildings of England (first published 1951 - 74) is usually referred to simply as 'Pevsner'. As a critic, academic and champion of Modernism, Pevsner became a central figure in the architectural consensus that accompanied post-war reconstruction; as a 'general practitioner' of architectural history, he covered an astonishing range, from Gothic cathedrals and Georgian coffee houses to the Festival of Britain and Brutalist tower blocks.

Susie Harries explores the truth about Nikolaus Pevsner's reported sympathies with elements of Nazi ideology, his internment in England as an enemy alien and his sometimes painful assimilation into his country of exile. His Heftchen - secret diaries he kept from the age of 14 for another sixty years - reveal hidden aspirations and anxieties, as do his numerous letters (he wrote to his wife, Lola, every day that they were apart).

Harries is the first biographer to have read Pevsner's private papers and, through them, to have seen into the workings of his mind. Her definitive biography is not only rich in context and far-ranging, but is also brought to life by quotations from Pevsner himself. He was born a Jew but converted to Lutheranism; trained in the rigour of German scholarship, he became an Everyman in his copious commissions, publications, broadcasts and lectures on art,

architecture, design, education, town planning, social housing, conservation, Mannerism, the Bauhaus, the Victorians, Zeitgeist, Englishness and how a nation's character may, or must, be reflected in its art. His life - as an outsider yet an insider at the heart of English art history - illuminates both the predicament and the prowess of the continental émigrés who did so much to shape British culture after 1945.

"An impressive biography of a remarkable man. On both counts it deserves to be widely read." --"Times Literary Supplement"  
"Eminently readable, a must for lovers of art history and architecture alike." --"Time Out"  
About the Author  
Susie Harries has coauthored seven books, including *The Academy of St Martin in the Fields*, *The War Artists*, and *A Pilgrim Soul: a Life of Elisabeth Lutyens*. She has also written for the *Independent* and reviewed books on the arts for *The Times Literary Supplement*.