

# Vladimir Rubinstein (1916-2008)

## Linguist with the BBC's wartime Monitoring Service.

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Vladimir Rubinstein (left) and colleague reporting to Information Bureau, 11 June 1941

Vladimir Rubinstein, who has died aged 91, was a significant figure in the BBC's crucial wartime monitoring of foreign radio broadcasts and in the global listening operations of the following decades.

Known as Vova, Vladimir Rubinstein was born on November 19 1916 into the thoroughly 19th-century household of his maternal grandfather, Josef Sundelevich, in Tallinn, Estonia, then still part of the Russian Empire.

Vova's father, Joseph, a cousin of the great musicians Anton and Nicolai Rubinstein, was a doctor. A native not of Estonia but of the Ukranian city of Nicolayev, Joseph Rubinstein returned there with his young family, but found himself pressed into medical service alternately by both the Red and the White Russian armies; so in 1920 Vova and his mother set off to return to the family base in Estonia, through the chaotic final throes of the Russian Revolution.

Their journey took almost a year. The engine of their train was repeatedly stolen by various factions, the coaches and passengers simply being abandoned in sidings until another could be found. When they finally reached Moscow, Vova's mother fell ill with typhoid, and it was left to an Estonian friend, a diplomat, to smuggle the boy back to his grandparents in Tallinn, where he was joined only much later by his parents.

In search of better prospects, the Rubinsteins moved in 1923 to Berlin, where for the next decade Vova received most of his schooling. Although he always felt a foreigner in

Germany, and was most comfortable in the company of his Russian boy scout friends, he flourished both academically and at sport. His athletic achievements were even immortalised by the makers of a Nazi propaganda film who – unaware of his Jewish background – featured him as a prime example of Aryan youth when documenting one of his school competitions.

But once the Nazis were actually in power, it rapidly became clear that the family had to leave, which they did just in time, the teenage Vova assuring their financial security by secreting large rolls of dollar bills in his father's X-ray equipment while the nervous doctor distracted the Nazi official supervising the packing with a cool beer. Following an intrepid, Zionist aunt, the Rubinsteins left Germany for British Palestine, where Vova completed his schooling.

In 1936 Rubinstein came to England, enrolling initially as a Law student at the LSE, and completing his degree at Peterhouse, Cambridge. After his graduation he was placed on the War Office's central register of specialists, thanks to his remarkable language skills; by this time he spoke Russian, French, German, English and Hebrew more or less perfectly, and could also get by in a surprising number of other languages. With the post-Dunkirk internment of most of England's native German-speakers, these skills became all the more relevant.

Rubinstein always claimed that he had been on the point of being sent to the Maginot Line, equipped with a loudhailer, to shout ultimatums to the Germans, but fortunately the government found a more important – and less hazardous – use for his languages.

In the early days of the Second World War it was quickly recognised that the regular domestic German radio broadcasts, and also those of Russia, France and Italy, were just as important a source of information as coded, military transmissions. A new monitoring operation was therefore established, run by the BBC, using all available technology to find and record these broadcasts, and relaying any significant contents to the relevant government and military departments.

In camouflaged huts in the grounds of a stately home near Evesham, a colourful team of engineers and linguists was assembled to do this work. It comprised not only highly conventional BBC engineers and supervisors, but also a diverse group of refugees and academics from all parts of Europe, united by their linguistic abilities, and including figures such as Ernst Gombrich, George Weidenfeld and Geoffrey Grigson.

Together these pioneers struggled to overcome the technical limitations of their primitive wax-cylinder recording equipment, battling (as Gombrich described it) to establish whether the faint, crackly voice on the recording was saying "Send reinforcements, am going to advance" or "Send three and fourpence, am going to a dance".

They also had to overcome the suspicions of the local Worcestershire population, some of whom found the presence of a large group of eccentric foreigners in their midst rather disconcerting in the middle of a war, and were not always impressed by the 24-hour comings and goings of the monitors, both male and female, many of whom had been forcibly billeted on local families.

In 1986 Rubinstein and another former monitor published a 40th anniversary anthology of their former colleagues' Evesham memories, entitled *Assigned to Listen*. One of his own most vivid wartime recollections was hearing and relaying the speech by Stalin that

contained the first clear indication of the Russians' intention to resist the German invasion, rather than doing a deal that would leave the Germans free to concentrate on the Western front, as many in Britain feared they would.

Towards the end of the war the BBC Monitoring Service moved from Evesham to Caversham Park, near Reading.

As the post-war focus shifted from Germany to Russia, Eastern Europe and the broader international arena, so monitoring operations expanded and diversified. For the next 30 years Rubinstein played a central role in maximising the effectiveness of the service, refining and running operations at Caversham with remarkable organisational skill, and also working abroad, often in challenging circumstances, setting up discreet remote listening stations around the world.

Throughout these decades, the monitoring of local radio broadcasts continued to provide a vital source of information during crises in which the movements and access of correspondents on the ground, and even of British diplomats, were often severely curtailed.

When, for example, the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, they rapidly occupied the studios of all the local radio stations, but neglected to secure some of the transmitters, from which the Czechs managed for some time to continue parallel, independent broadcasts.

It was crucial to Western understanding of the situation to find and monitor those broadcasts, and interpret the differences between them and those put out by the Russians from the stations' main studios.

A few years earlier, as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis reached its climax, the Russian president Nikita Khrushchev had broadcast his effective capitulation on a domestic radio channel – knowing full well that it would be monitored at Caversham, and relayed instantly to the White House.

The reputation of the BBC Monitoring Service was such that President Kennedy responded to Khrushchev's overture immediately, without even waiting for his own diplomatic sources to confirm this crucial change in the Russian position. Rubinstein was the primary, if largely anonymous, architect of the BBC Monitoring Service's reputation for infallibility, running listening operations with total precision, and using his great humanity to get the very best out of his diverse and complex team.

Rubinstein was the last surviving member of the generation of his family that experienced the uncertainties of life in pre-war Eastern Europe and Germany, which led to the displacement and death of so many. The security that he enjoyed after his arrival in England was something he never took for granted, and for which he was always profoundly grateful.

He was appointed MBE in 1973.

Vladimir Rubinstein, who died on October 19, is survived by his wife, Vivienne, whom he married in 1955, as well as by their daughter, Catherine, and son Gregory, who is worldwide head of old master drawings at Sotheby's.