

# Collier's

JANUARY 30, 1943

## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Here at the State desk of the **FBIS** David Goodman checks latest Nazi radio claims on a map. The desk monitors, edits foreign broadcasts for State and other government departments

**By Helena Huntington Smith**

**They're known as the Screwball Division, these 60-odd linguists who listen to all the world's radios for Uncle Sam. But there's nothing screwy about the job they're doing. Information they pick up from our loquacious enemies is helping to win the war**

**Q**UITE a long time before last November 7th—the exact date has not been disclosed—a man in the Office of War Information had a phone call from an Army officer. Did he happen to know of anybody, the officer asked, who knew Arabic? No reason was given for the request, and you don't ask questions of the Army these days.

"We haven't got anybody around here," said the OWI man. "But why don't you call Harold Graves at the FBIS? They've got all kinds of people over there who talk all kinds of languages."

The FBIS—short for Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service—is the organization that listens to the world's radios for Uncle Sam. Its monitoring station in Washington has, besides editors and analysts, some sixty fantastic linguists on its staff—people who are fluently at home in anywhere from three or four up to a couple of dozen languages apiece. Their job is to intercept and translate the short-wave broadcasts of Rome, Berlin, Vichy and a score of lesser stations, which daily pour out Axis propaganda in more languages than were ever spoken in the Tower of Babel.

Among the monitors is Dr. Habib J. Awad, an Oriental savant who was born in the republic of Lebanon, near Syria. Dr. Awad holds Ph.D.'s from institutions of learning in Brooklyn, in Beirut, in Buffalo, N. Y., in Rome and quite a few other places, and he speaks twenty-five languages, most of which are Arabic when they are not Turkish or Persian or Hindustani or something else. His ordinary task is listening to propaganda broadcast daily by the Axis to the peoples of the Near East. He and the Army officer were duly introduced to each other.

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



An Oriental scholar who has studied from Beirut to Brooklyn, Dr. Habib Awad speaks twenty-five languages. Prior to invasion of North Africa, he made recordings to teach our men common Arab phrases

Then, curtain. Until, on the night of November 7th, American forces landed in Africa and the little affair of Dr. Awad became one more "Now it can be told." At the Army's request he had made recordings in seven Arabic dialects, spoken in as many parts of Africa. As a result, on the morning of November 8th, London heard a voice coming from Radio Rabat in Morocco. "*Habitants du Maroc*," it said. "*Ici le poste Américain, Secteur du Maroc*"—which was a queer way for the American Army to talk and which, freely translated, meant: "People of Morocco: You are listening to a U. S. Forces transmitter in the Moroccan sector." Then followed the Roosevelt and Eisenhower messages to the Moroccan people.

As another result, American troops are now able to address to the people of Morocco, Algeria and other countries, such useful and touching phrases as "How are you?" "Speak more slowly, please," and "Where is the movie?"

This modest contribution to the second front was a little off the usual FBIS line, which is radio intelligence. The shabby old building in Washington—it's a converted apartment house—is part of a listening network that covers the world. The United States has monitoring stations in San Francisco; in Portland, Oregon; in Kingsville, Texas; and in Puerto Rico. San Francisco and Portland listen to Russia and the Far East, with particular attention to Japanese Empire broadcasts. Kingsville listens to Latin America. Puerto Rico picks up medium- and long-wave broadcasts in the Caribbean area, which would not otherwise be heard here, and gets a few from Africa besides. Washington, of course, hears London, as well as Hitler's Europe. Much of our effort, in fact, is directed toward catching the broadcast of our allies.

But whether we are listening directly to Berlin and Tokyo, or to what comes over from Moscow or Mexico City or London, the fundamental object is the same: to catch every scrap of information which may be flying through the air in any part of the world, about the enemy.

The real receiving station in Washington is outside the city and is connected by telephone with the old building. Twenty monitors listen in relays around the clock, and as they listen they type out summaries, which are put on the teletype for the Army, the Navy, the State Department, the White House and other interested customers in the government.

The monitor's job is to catch the possibly epoch-making words of Hitler or Laval through



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Glorina Paniagua, of Caracas, translates broadcasts beamed from Europe to Latin America. Her father was in the consular service and she has lived most of her life in various foreign capitals

crackles, sputters, whistles and roars of static. At the same time he must type, translate and summarize, and his summary must hit the high spots. As a trick it is rather like the one you tried as a child rotating one hand on your tummy while patting your head with the other. Forty translators work along with the monitors, turning out complete texts of important broadcasts.

The translator can take his time, relatively speaking, but he has to work from a record playing it over and over to catch doubtful phrases. Berlin puts out a program called, in English, "Hot Shots from the Front," which is the particular *bête noire* of translators. It purports to be a genuine program of close-ups of the front and it probably is, in most cases. What with the announcer yelling, planes roaring, shells and bombs exploding, and the static, every translator who hears it for the first time has nightmares.

The enemy is not quite so smart as we have been led to believe him. Nor are we ourselves so dumb. We labor under the delusion that the democracies do all the talking. Actually, the enemy talks plenty, trying to sell his "glorious New Order" to the world. And when he talks he gives himself away. Day in and day out a careful check of his utterances, comparing them with what he said a month, a year, two years ago, gives a clue to his weaknesses and his intentions. This checking is done by the Analysis Division, composed largely of transplanted college professors. In fact, the whole FBIS organization is rife with Ph.D.'s, one of whom, Robert Devore Leigh, is the head of it. He is an ex-president of two colleges, Bennington in Vermont and Bard College on the Hudson.

The job of the Analysis Division is to point to such things as the gradual deflation of Hitler in his three October speeches, from the high of 1940 to the low of 1942. There is also the matter of inadvertencies. Most of the story of these "slips" can't be told until after the war, because most of it is military, but a few hints have been dropped. Once, an item picked out of the air in the morning had by midafternoon saved military equipment of more value than the maintenance cost of the listening post for a year—to say nothing of lives.

### A Slip of the Tongue

Another time, quite recently, the Berlin radio was heard to say that the Luftwaffe had bombed Schluesselburg, a fort on the outskirts of Leningrad. A routine item, apparently—unless you recalled that a year ago the Nazis claimed the capture of Schluesselburg. Those closemouthed Russians have evidently taken it back.

The monitors could, if they wanted to, get out a column of news and gossip about the enemy. For instance: "Here is Hans Fritzche back on the air in Berlin. He is the slickest propagandist of all the Berlin commentators; a while back they moved him out to bolster the sagging spirits of the soldiers on the Russian front. But now they need him to do some explaining to South America. . . . Fred Kaltenbach, the Iowa Lord Hee-Haw, seems to be doing right well for himself over there. He's used for important stuff lately, could almost be called a mouthpiece of Goebbels. . . . On the other hand Robert Best, the renegade American newspaperman, is slipping, his Southern voice has been recognized in English broadcasts to North America, reading routine station news announcements *anonymously*—which is pretty clear evidence that they don't think much of him.

"And what in the world has come over Impertinax, ace commentator of the Rome Radio? Since the landings in Africa he has let slip the queerest things: that the Italians must be ready, in their time of trial, to show the fortitude of the British after Dunkirk; that Churchill is 'not without greatness.' It almost looks as though the Italians had some regrets."

London has been monitoring foreign broadcasts



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Raiko Ruzic, Ph.D., is a Serb who has mastered the philology of the Balkans. He has just been listening to a report of the murder of 200 of his countrymen. In his way he's fighting too

since near the close of the last war, but the idea of an official U. S. monitoring service, to give greater coverage and more detailed service than was possible through private radio chains or the newspapers, was not born until early in 1941. Its godfather was Breckinridge Long of the State Department, who foresaw that we might one day be cut off from accustomed sources of news in foreign countries. He took it up with Chairman Fly of the FCC, who set to work to organize a unit. Right away there was the problem of finding a staff.

The Civil Service rolls were chockablock with translators so-called—cold linguists who could read and write a foreign language immaculately, but were hopelessly swamped when it came to catching the spoken word on the fly amid the difficulties previously mentioned. When a staff was finally assembled it was the greatest collection of individualists, international rolling stones and slightly batty geniuses ever gathered together in one organization. To the rest of the FBIS the foreign-language contingent is referred to, with sweet simplicity, as the Screwball Division.

One of its leading spirits is a black-eyed Serbian who holds a Ph.D., wears a beret and was, until recently, professor of Sanskrit, Indo-European philology and Slavic languages in the University of California. He also edited Serbian and Croat language newspapers in San Francisco, and in his odd moments he did anthropological field work among the Indians of the Southwest. He had arrived in this country in 1929 and had surprised the first girls he met by referring to them as "wenches." They didn't know he had learned his English from Shakespeare. He says: "I do not know any languages. But I have studied twenty-five.

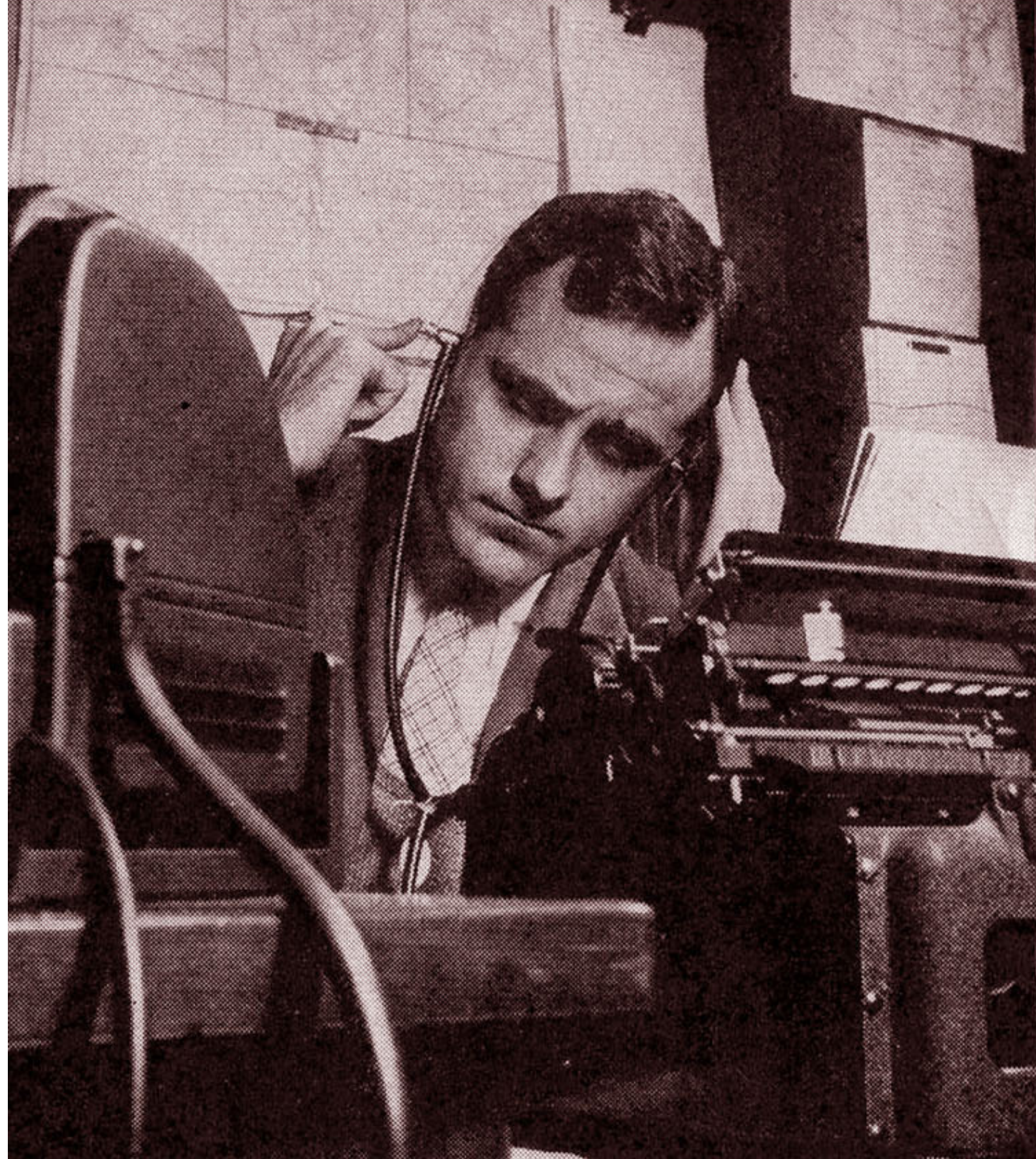
One of his co-workers questioned the first part of this statement and said that anyhow he was wrong in his count. It should have been higher.

His main job is to listen to the Nazi-dominated Croat and Hungarian stations enlightening conquered Balkan peoples about the New Order. A Chetnik himself, he would like to listen to the hidden freedom station that broadcasts to Mikhailovitch's followers from somewhere in the Serbian mountains. But the Chetnik radio station doesn't reach this country. Instead he hears, over and over again, the Nazified stations promising to exterminate his people, the Serbs.

All of the monitors, and there are several, who left ties in occupied countries have had some bad listening to do, but none has had worse than Ruzic, who came from a city called Novi Sad. Once he heard the Nazi-Croat announcer boasting that ten thousand inhabitants of Novi Sad had been massacred and thrown into the Danube.



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Jacques Davidson, son of the sculptor Jo Davidson, heads the French translators in the FBIS. Right now he is translating a speech by stooge Laval which you can bet follows the directives of Berlin

### Our International Monitors

Some of the listeners are foreign. Others are much-traveled Americans, or girls who as children lived with their families in far places. One of them is Reuben Fine, seven times American chess champion, who learned German and Dutch and French abroad. One girl is half English and half French, and was brought up in China by a Russian nurse. The Portland, Oregon, station has a monitor named Bill Pollock who listens to Russian broadcasts, and to the French and German put out by Tokyo. He was born in this country of Russian parentage and spent most of his life in China, where he was correspondent for a French news agency.

For the most part, the background of the listeners is international. But there are exceptions. Leon Litvin, in the San Francisco station, knows six languages and learned them all in Brooklyn. And in Washington one of the ace monitors of the German section is David Goodman, who was a schoolteacher in Philadelphia, and has never been in Germany in his life. He listens to the Chief.

The Chief is the mysterious voice of one of the very few German clandestine stations heard since the war began. He seems to be an old-line army man, apparently of high rank; whoever he is, he hates the Nazi political gang almost as much as he hates the Russians, the British, and the Italians; though he walks warily around the subject of the Fuehrer himself. The Chief is a hobby with Goodman, who never misses one of his short, pungent broadcasts. He certainly has access to some inside information.

### Tip-off on Nazidom

News of promotions, demotions and intrigues in the Hitlerian high command often leaks out first through the Chief; he was the first to break the news of the typhus epidemic in the German army in Russia last winter; and he mentioned a revolt among German submarine crews landing in Portugal that was not only interesting as to the submarine crews but revealed for the first time that submarines were basing in Portugal.

So he's very important. But also his language is very obscene, and this has caused complications in the FBIS office. Mothers of sweet young translators have called up, protesting because their daughters had read the transcripts; and a chivalrous editor has been known to sit down and peck out some of the Chief's more flavorful broadcasts himself, to spare the blushes of the teletype girl.

It was Goodman, fiddling around with an engineer one night on a hint dropped by the Chief, who discovered the second German clandestine station, Army Transmitter North. ATN purports to be a regular army station in Norway, broadcasting to the German army of occupa-



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Reuben Fine

tion there. It goes through the motions of being a loyal, official army station giving news and greetings to soldiers; but every so often it jabs in with some item of heavy losses in the Luftwaffe—industrial accidents—scandalous expenditures by prominent Nazis; which makes it the radio discovery of the year.

Monitoring is all right when your own side is winning, but when it isn't, the most hardened listener will hear something occasionally that gets under his skin. There are individual ways of reacting to this. Big Victor Volmar, who was born in Germany but hates everything German, takes both hands off his typewriter and shakes his fists above his head, exclaiming, "It's a lie!" Ruzic swears in Serbian. One of the French monitors is an American girl who lived half of her life in France, and left a dearly loved home in Paris just one jump before the Nazi army came in.

When she heard the shame of Laval's speech, telling Frenchwomen that they could go to their husbands who were prisoners in Germany if they would work for Hitler, she went out for a long walk by herself in the night.

### The Enemy Listens, Too

One night last fall, the monitor taking Berlin was a little surprised to hear the announcer on the other side make a sarcastic reference to the "highly paid monitors of the Foreign Intelligence Service, in their building on K Street in



Jerry McWilliams in the late hours has a cup of coffee at desk where he edits foreign broadcasts for the Office of War Information. His leads are valuable in preparing our answer to the enemy



## IT PAYS TO LISTEN



Frances Lane monitors French broadcasts, has lived half her life in France, only escaped from Paris as the Nazi hordes occupied the city. Because her husband is still there she uses an assumed name

Washington." There followed a fairly good description of the building. Information of all kinds gets over there. An article in an American newspaper will often come back over the air waves, in the shape of quotation or comment, within twenty-four hours. If the American public could only realize how much does get over there, and how quickly, it would be more careful.

The Washington monitoring station is organized like a newspaper office. For its "customers" in the government, it operates three wire services and a daily publication, containing news of the air wherever monitored in the United States. The staff is made up of old newspapermen with foreign experience; young ones, too. Maybe it's the unique combination of newspapermen and Ph.D.'s that gives the listening post its color and its crackle. Maybe it's other things, too—the banging of teletypes, the global maps on every wall, the casual kidding in seventeen foreign languages; the feeling that something big may come over at any minute.

On November 7th it did.

The opening of the second front, as Washington heard it on the air, was a drama of Europe's radios—little stations, many of them, that had seldom if ever made the front pages of history before. This country, out of reach of Europe's long-wave, got the story flash by flash from London.

It began before the invasion itself. For days Axis-influenced radios over there had been buzzing like angry hornets, with reports of big convoys; with wild stories of Allied landings here, there and everywhere. Nobody here became much excited. It was thought that another convoy was going to Malta.

By a few minutes after 9 on November 7th, the official news was all over the world. Thereafter and for the next forty-eight hours, the monitoring rooms became a seething madhouse; but everybody had time to cheer when the flash came that the guns of Casablanca had ceased firing. Before that, for a few moments on the morning of the 8th, the radio drama and the drama of the African beaches came together. At 1:48 A. M., Eastern United States time, London heard the American voices previously referred to, coming from Radio Rabat, in Morocco.

At 2:15 London flashed the news over here. Five hours after the official announcement of the landings, this was the first direct word received from the invasion forces themselves.

A monitor's life has few dull moments, but even a monitor's life has few moments like that.