

# The life and times of a Czech-born broadcaster who became an English knight

by Angela Spindler-Brown

## John Tusa, *Making a Noise, Getting it Right, Getting it Wrong in Life, Broadcasting and the Arts*

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For many in London John Tusa, Newsnight presenter and managing director BBC World Service between 1980-1993, has been a Czech with perfect, faultless English, both spoken and written, and impeccable manners. But his autobiography *Making a Noise* says very little about his Czech heritage for there isn't much to tell.

He came to London as a three-year-old-boy, escaping with his mother from the Nazis as Czechoslovakia was being occupied in 1939. His father, director of Bata shoe enterprises, set up their English home in a detached house in east Essex and Czechoslovakia was left behind.

English became the language to be used: "Officially we didn't speak Czech at home. At least not to one another," Tusa notes. He never learned to speak Czech and spent only three years in the country of his birth.

But his Czech background stood him in good stead: during his national service when he professed knowledge about the political situation in the Communist East and jousting in the Cold War, and later on as a broadcaster in the BBC. He only briefly mentions that his Czech family suffered in the Communist-run country on a few occasions in his book.

In *Making a Noise* Sir John, who was knighted in 2003 while running the BBC World Service, describes the journey of a boy from a middle class Czech émigré family to a middle class British environment. He travelled the well-trodden way: prep school, public school student, army officer, Oxbridge undergraduate, BBC trainee and journalist.

It is his work at the BBC which he describes in great detail, with passion and love. He brought serious yet popular programmes dealing with history to British television when producing *Timewatch* programmes for BBC TV. His description of how the BBC current affairs programme, *Newsnight*, which is still running, came into being.

Later on in the 1990s, Tusa modernised the BBC World Service which was then based at Bush House in central London

and partly financed by the Foreign Office. He insists that any service, especially the BBC can only be changed if one loves what it does and wants to strengthen it and improve it.

And the World Service did go from strength to strength under his management. He says that he "was the first managing director who could say that he knew what was being broadcast in Britain's name in languages other than English." He demanded that the foreign language broadcasts say exactly the same as the original news in English.

However unexpected issues were encountered when precise translations from English were to be made in the 37 languages the BBC broadcast to the world. "We learned a great deal too about the nature of the mother language English, much about the perils of translation," Tusa writes.

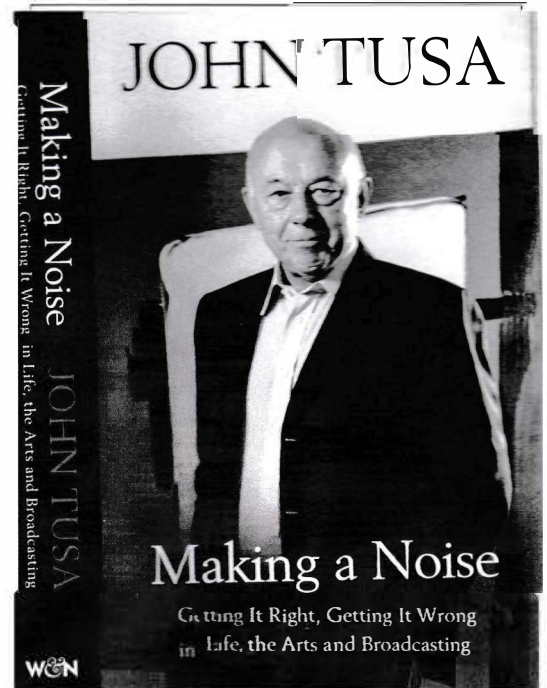
"We soon understood that looking for literal translation was impossible and foolish. Accurate rendering of meaning was the desired goal. More important, the language under scrutiny proved to be English itself. Our vernacular colleagues wrote politely of its shiftiness, its plethora of weasel words, its deliberate impression, mere hints of meaning masquerading as statements of fact.

"Our Hungarian colleague observed that the task of turning English into Hungarian raised 'the difficulty of rendering opacity convincingly and of providing a plausible equivalent of waffle.'"

"I tried to sum up the often scholarly views of our colleagues like this: The English language emerges as misty as its landscape, the emanation of a people who had created a language perfectly adapted to suit their own refusal to say what they mean."

Tusa does not always spell out what other languages – yes, Czech among them – would express much more clearly. But he is very open, without weasel words, even using an exclamation mark when he describes the struggle within the BBC during his time.

Marmaduke Hussey, Thatcher's



appointed BBC chairman, is portrayed by Tusa as one who set out to break the BBC, who didn't feel any empathy and worse, hated the unique British national institution.

Tusa presented him as an autocratic, snobbish and destructive force. He quotes that Hussey went so far in his autobiography to accuse Tusa of setting up a private company into which his salary should be paid like John Birt, a controversial BBC boss at the time.

Tusa defends himself and says this never happened. "I had never set up a private company for taxation purposes. Why Hussey wrote what he did will never be known. I knew he disliked me but had not realised how much!

"I can only describe what he wrote as a vendetta carried to his grave."

Tusa was a director general the service never had and he left the corporation at the end of 1992.

After leaving the BBC he was president of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and softened the concrete at The Barbican, as he describes in the chapter about his directorship of this London Art Centre. He also headed the London University of Arts.

In the concluding part of his autobiography, entitled *Envoi* – he has a list of regrets.

It clearly reveals that it was TV journalism which was his only real and loved vocation. He regrets not making various TV programmes, one of them – never presenting the New Year's Day concert from Vienna. But first among his regrets is the Czech language: regretting that he never learned to speak it.

