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## OBITUARIES

# Mark Abrams

MARK ABRAMS, who has died aged 88, was a founding father of social and market research, and a pioneer of political polling.

Although he spent much of his working life in the commercial field — he set up Research Services Ltd in 1946 and ran it for some 20 years — he was equally comfortable, and respected, in the worlds of politics and academe.

Mark Alexander Abrams was born at Edmonton, north London, on April 27 1906, one of eight children of mixed Latvian and Lithuanian Jewish parents. He was educated at Latymer School, Edmonton, and for a while seemed destined for the rabbinate.

Instead he went to the London School of Economics, and then to the Brookings Institute in Washington, as a research fellow. On his return to England in 1933 he took a job at the research department of the London Press Exchange (LPE), then one of Britain's leading advertising agencies.

In his six years at the LPE Abrams conducted surveys of newspaper and magazine readerships and of consumer behaviour, establishing his position as the pre-eminent authority on market research.

He also carried out surveys for the Gas Light and Coke



Mark Abrams in 1986

Company (asking people how often and when they took hot baths), and for Rowntree.

Abrams collaborated with social scientists abroad, and became involved in rescuing refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. In 1939 he helped Freud in his final move to England.

From 1939 to 1941 Abrams worked with the BBC Overseas Research Department, where he was asked by the Government to find out from German propaganda broadcasts whether Hitler intended to attack British shores.

"We called it decoding at the time," he later recalled.

"Today we call it content analysis. I concluded that the German people were being conditioned to the fact that an invasion would not take place. I told the Government so."

During the Second World War Abrams also worked with the Psychological Warfare Board, where he researched issues such as the impact of bombing on civilian morale. His work on food consumption during the war proved a turning-point in government data collection; the National Food Survey has operated, in one form or another, ever since.

In 1946 Abrams returned to more mundane matters, founding Research Services Ltd and the Market Research Society. The ailing *Daily Herald* commissioned him to make recommendations on how to rebuild its readership. The newspaper later folded. "Win some, lose some," Abrams commented ruefully.

In the 1950s and 1960s he had strong links with the Labour Party and organised many of their private polls. He occasionally expressed concern at the inability of some senior politicians to understand even the most basic survey data.

From 1970 to 1976 Abrams was the director of the survey research unit at what was then the Social Science

Research Council. He became research director of Age Concern, acted as an adviser to the Consumers' Association, and added to his lengthy and influential list of publications.

These included *Condition of the British People, 1911-1946* (1947), *Social Surveys and Social Action* (1951) and *People in their Sixties* (1983). He encouraged scores of young researchers in their careers.

Abrams was a courageous, experimental and occasionally idiosyncratic researcher, who more than anyone else bridged the often antagonistic worlds of academic, political and commercial research. He believed in research not merely as a means of describing society, but as an instrument to help to improve it.

A humorous man with a love of music, Abrams was a skilful raconteur and held a deep belief in debate and democracy. His vivacity and delight in argument lasted to the end. "My grandfather was a senior rabbi and my father was a philosophical anarchist," he once observed. "We have a tradition of using the brain."

He married, in 1931, Una Strugnell; they had a son and a daughter. The marriage was dissolved in 1951 and he married, the same year, Jean Bird; they had a daughter.