

## Radio Play: *SOS...rao rao...Foyn* - “*Krassin*” Rescues “*Italia*” (1929)

### Abstract

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This excerpt comes from the oldest completely preserved German radio play, first broadcast by a Cologne radio station in 1929. The play drew its material from an actual and very recent event—the May 1928 crash of the airship *Italia* during a flight over the North Pole, sponsored by the Italian Geographical Society, with assistance from the Italian Navy. An amateur radio operator in Russia picked up the distress call, “SOS... rao... rao... foyn,” sent by the survivors, who had found temporary refuge on an ice floe. Soviet authorities then dispatched the icebreaker *Krassin*, which managed to rescue eight survivors, although seventeen people in total died during the crash and its aftermath. The playwright Friedrich Wolf viewed the 1928 rescue operation as a victory for international cooperation, and he hoped that his radio play would further the cause of global solidarity. The script cobbled together snippets of conversation, short scenes, and radio transmissions to convey the tension of the unfolding events, and the resulting production captured the imaginations of radio listeners across Germany. For the first time, well over a dozen stations around the country broadcast the same play within a single week in early November, from Freiburg in the southwest to Königsberg in the northeast. This historic accomplishment highlighted how quickly radio had spread in the 1920s, as well as the tremendous popularity of audio dramas as a new entertainment genre. Wolf, meanwhile—who not only wrote, but also worked as a physician and lent his support to the KPD—achieved even greater notoriety as an outspoken proponent of legalized abortion and the author of the 1929 drama *Cyankali* [Cyanide], about a woman who could not secure medical assistance to end her pregnancy and died in the process of attempting to do so on her own. After the Nazis came to power, Wolf and his family fled to Moscow.

### Source

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Speaker: The following radio play was written because the material demanded it. The tragedy of the airship *Italia*. The cries for help of the nine men on the ice floe sent into the ether by the radio operator, Biaggi. The futile search of all major radio stations. The recording of the garbled SOS call Rao Rao Foyn by amateur radio operator Nikolai Schmidt's homemade shortwave radio in a remote village high up in the north of the Murmansk coast. The radio communication between those imprisoned on the ice and radio stations around the world. Their daily radio transmission of the drifting ice floe's geographical position. The numerous forays by Italian, Norwegian, French, and Russian aircraft. The unsuccessful attempt by the first Russian icebreaker, the *Malign*. And the successful, difficult breakthrough by the most powerful icebreaker, the *Krassin*, directed by its catapult plane, the three-engine Junkers aircraft piloted by a Russian, Chuchnovsky. All of this is truly the first heroic saga of our time, our technology, and our solidarity. It was not the impulse of an *Übermensch*, nor the ethos of a religious or political idea that made this rescue possible, but the solidarity of nations, inspired by technology. This living example closed the circle from the lonely radio tinkerer on the coast of Murmansk to the large radio station in Rome, to the red tent on the ice floe and the pilot Chuchnovsky. It is a fact, without a moment's hesitation, one system, with a completely different political orientation, helped the opposing system in a brotherly way. And this help was only possible through the most modern means of communication, through the radio.

Radio announcement: Attention, attention, this is wave 401, Roma, San Paolo, we are looking for airship *Italia*, we are looking for *Nobile*. We request 10 minutes of radio silence for our connection with *Nobile*,

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attention, attention, this is wave 401, Roma-San Paolo, where is Nobile, where is Italia? We are giving our sign for ten minutes. Answer with the exact position, geographical longitude and latitude of your location. We have had no news from you for 32 hours. Are you all right? On the ice, on the water, in the air, are you in distress, do you need help, a plane, a ship, a sled? Attention, attention, this is Roma, San Paolo, wave 401, we are waiting. We are waiting.

Attention, this is wave 720, Leningrad. Attention, this is wave 720, Leningrad. Where is Italia? Where is Italia? Attention, radio silence for all stations on the coast of Murmansk. All stations, from 22:30 to 23:00, listen fully for signals from Italia. SOS calls possible.

This is Roma San Paolo, we are searching for Nobile. We are waiting.

Distress call: Ecco, Ecco! This is the crew of the Italia, wave length 926, position 80 degrees, 50 minutes north, 27 degrees, 15 minutes east, SOS, SOS, we are on an ice floe. We have no water, no bread, no meat, no ammunition, no sleds. General Nobile has broken his arm, Cecioni both legs. There are only ten of us. The six other comrades have been blown away with the balloon envelope.

Attention, attention! Attention Sputatore di Mondo, Sparks, can you already hear Rome? What does Mama Mia say? Is the Arco di Trionfo already erected? Carvaco, maledetto mia. If they could throw us a few salamis through the air instead of decorations. Can't you hear? Biaggi, we're out of chocolate. And tinned meat. What now? Give our position again exactly. South of Foyn Island. Do you hear me?

Ecco, ecco, Italia, wave 926. We are drifting on an ice floe south of Foyn Island. SOS RAO RAO Foyn. We call this call every hour for ten minutes, SOS, RAO RAO Foyn. Reply if you can hear us, SOS, RAO RAO Foyn.

There's something coming up from the northeast again. Yellow-white like lead. Fog and snow. We are drifting west. I give us three days, if this ice tray holds together and does not crumble.

Ecco! Ecco Italia! Yes, wavelength 926, snowstorm, can't you hear us? S.O.S., RAO RAO Foyn, RAO RAO Foyn S.O.S.! S.O.S., can't anybody hear us? S.O.S.

Fyodor: Good evening, Nikolai. Well, Fyodor, are you done in the stable, Fyodor? Yes. Well, are you spinning threads in the air again? Oh God, you can spare yourself the whining. Put on some music.

Nikolai: A new ship, Fyodor, that I don't recognize.

Fyodor: I'm sure there are many you won't recognize, little brother.

Nikolai: No, no. S.O.S. S.O.S. Fyodor, it's in distress. A shortwave. Not a big station. It's calling, Fyodor, calling, and no one is listening. No name, the ship, Fyodor.

Fyodor: You and your ship names. You'd better change the station. What are the unions in Moscow saying?

Nikolai: Over and over, over and over, over and over, over and over. It keeps transmitting. S-O-S, S-O-S, S-O-S. What kind of words are those? Tengo. Terra. S-O-S, S-O-S. RAO RAO Foyn. So the ship's name is Foyn. Quiet, Fyodor, quiet now! Now there's a word, a name, over and over again the name. I-ta-l-i-a, I-Italia. Fyodor, it's Italia. Italia is in trouble, Fyodor. There's a name again. Over and over again a name, over and over again a name. Nobile. Nobile. Fyodor, Nobile is calling! Fyodor, do you hear? Nobile is alive! Nobile is calling from the airship Italia in the Arctic Ocean!

Fyodor: What, Nobile, the one you told me about?

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Nikolai: Yes, for whom our Leningrad station orders radio silence every evening. Listen, Leningrad has to know about this, Moscow has to know this. Nobile is in distress!

Fyodor: And you heard him?

Nikolai: Yes, yes, quiet, quiet, quiet! He's still calling. Nine men are alive, six on the floe, three on their own. And now in numbers. Paper, paper, Fyodor! Write, write! Paper, write, Fyodor! Position 80 degrees, 50 minutes. North 27 degrees, 15 minutes. East, SOS, RAO RAO Foyn.

Source: Friedrich Wolf, SOS...rao rao...Foyn – „Krassin“ rettet „Italia“, radio play, 1928. Music: Walter Goehr, Director: Alfred Braun. First broadcast: Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft, November 5, 1929. Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv, accessed via Internet Archive

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