

Fernempfangsstelle



Artist and radio enthusiast Niki Matita unveils a series of works and research sparked by a recent serendipitous discovery of ephemera and records shedding light on the life, work, and tragic demise of the forgotten radio operator technician Rudolf Formis. In addition to this narrative, Matita recounts the historical developments off Stuttgart's main public radio company and pivotal broadcasting events in which Formis played a role, during the times of the Weimar Republic just before the ascent of Germany's National Socialist Party.

Niki Matita

Niki Matita, *Rudolf Formis at the remote reception station on the attic of Solitude Palace*, drawing. Courtesy the artist

The Solitude remote reception station was an early broadcasting facility set in the Baroque-era palace Schloss Solitude near Stuttgart. In this series of works based on ongoing artistic research, the quest for audio artifacts presents itself as a particular challenge. From this period, virtually no recordings exist from the Solitude receiving station or of its Swabian builder, Rudolf Formis, who would occasionally go on air himself. In the course of my artistic research, various methods and techniques were thought through and tested within the field of sound art to approach the subject of early radio facilities in Stuttgart and the man who played a major role in creating them. Central to this work is the exploration of archives and libraries that have previously been rather distant to my regular practice. These hold breathtaking material that reveal a wide variety of new understandings from my findings; parallel to this were the most diverse interactions cultivated by the institutions when accessing their holdings. Since the history of Stuttgart's early long-distance broadcasting facility and international networking practices has been locally forgotten today, as has the tragic fate of its creator, my unconditional dedication to serendipity is fundamental. I keep my eyes and ears wide open to unique evidence and information that can aid in my research and the wild speculations one might imagine during his time, space, and work – and to artistically process these findings in my art.

On March 3, 1924, the Stuttgart broadcasting company Süddeutscher Rundfunk AG (SÜRAG)¹ was formally founded for the purpose of »organising and wirelessly broadcasting lectures, news, and presentations of artistic, educational, and entertaining content as well as other content of interest to wider circles of the population in Stuttgart and the surrounding area.«

The following persons were crucial to decisive for the founding and the future of the broadcasting company: the theatre critic Dr. Alfred Bofinger as chairman, the concert agent Leon Hauser for the program management, and the industrialist and chairman of the board of the Stuttgart-based Deutsches Auslandsinstitut (DAI), Theodor Wanner, who took over the chairmanship of the supervisory board. Today, the DAI is known as the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) and is still located in the former Altes Waisenhaus (old orphanage) on Charlottenplatz in Stuttgart's city centre. Similar to the approach already taken at the Linden-Museum (Stuttgart's ethnological museum),² the complex and sometimes difficult history of this institution and its role worldwide has yet to be reappraised.

Until autumn 1923, it was forbidden for private individuals in Germany to receive radio broadcasts. A radio reception license was required, which was accompanied by a radio license fee. In 1924, the fee was equivalent to about one-third of the average monthly salary.

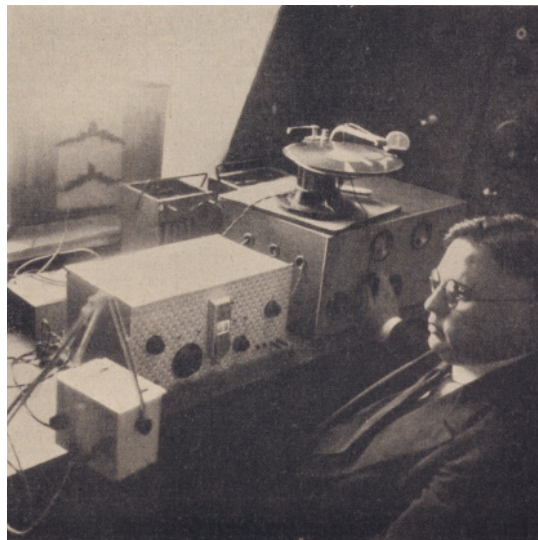
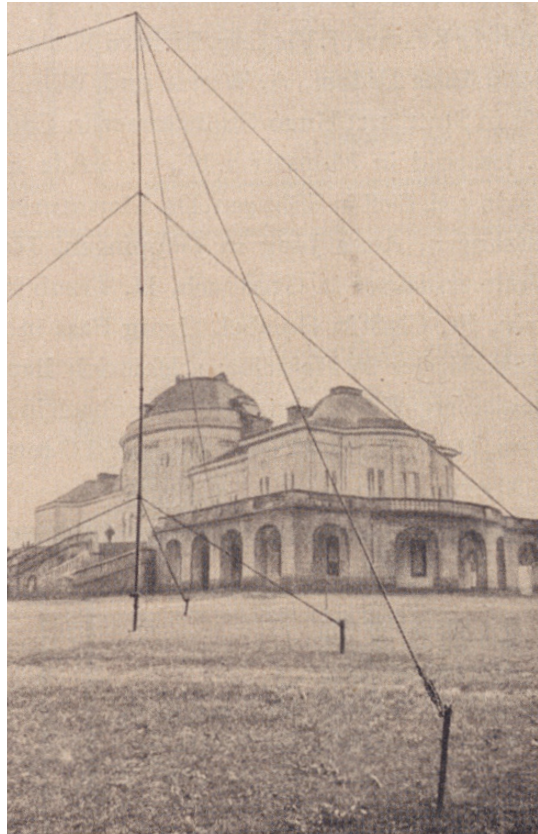
The technician and merchant Rudolf »Rolf« Formis served as a radio soldier in World War I. He had been among the first radio subscribers, holding a license since November 6, 1923, at the peak of hyperinflation. The first license for private radio reception had been granted six days earlier to Wilhelm Kollhof, a Berlin cigar vendor, for 350 billion marks. On May 11, 1924, SÜRAG began broadcasting with a daily program of four hours. At that time, 4.2 million people lived in the broadcasting area, and on the opening day it had 112 radio subscribers.

Formis became active as a radio amateur and took part with the German delegation in the founding meeting of the IABU (L'Union Internationale des Amateurs de T.S.F.) in Paris in April 1925. In July, the Deutscher Funktechnischer Verband (DFTV) was founded in Munich. Formis has been appointed as a member of the foreign committee, while working as a freelancer for SÜRAG since the time the broadcasting station was set up.

In 1925 Rudolf Formis introduced the German amateur radio designation DE for German receiving station and designed the first QSL card. He himself had the designation DE 0100.³ Formis's call sign⁴ as a broadcasting amateur was KY4. In the same year, the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft (RRG)⁵ was founded as the umbrella organization of the nine regional German radio stations, including SÜRAG. The State Secretary at the Post Ministry Hans Bredow was appointed director of RRG on June 1, 1925.

Formis was not only active as a technician for the Stuttgart broadcasting company. In the 1920s, »radio tinkering« became an increasingly popular hobby. On the SÜRAG microphone, Formis gave courses on radio and radio-related topics such as physical basics, Morse code, or building radio receivers. Accompanying material can be found in the station's radio magazine, which documents the rich variety of topics that Formis covered, reminding today's viewers of multimedia presentation tools and distance learning, e.g. homeschooling. He also provided practical information on dangers such as lightning strikes and gave lectures on the subject locally at the radio clubs that flourished throughout the country.

In 1928, the first director of SÜRAG, Dr. Alfred Bofinger, commissioned Formis as a freelance technician to set up a long-distance receiving station at Schloss



Antennae in front of Schloss Solitude Stuttgart.
Source: SWR (Südwestrundfunk) archive

Rudolf Formis in the in the remote reception centre.
Source: SWR (Südwestrundfunk) archive



Niki Matita recording at Rudolf Formis' grave in Slapy, Czech Republic.
Photo: Ladislav Železný. Courtesy the photographer

Solitude on a hill near Stuttgart to enable the transmission of reports from overseas. Two seventeen meter high masts were erected on the surrounding meadows. Between these and the twenty meter high dome of the palace, four antennae were put up.⁶

Spectacular transmissions were realized from the Solitude remote reception station. For example, on October 11, 1928, the airship LZ 127 Graf Zeppelin took off from Lake Constance and set course for North America. The aircraft had unprecedented dimensions: 236 meters in length, with 105,000 cubic meters of gas filling, five engines for a cruising speed of 110 kilometers per hour, and a range of 10,000 kilometers. On October 31, 1928, and March 28, 1929, live radio contact with the Zeppelin airship could be transmitted.

Also, a live transmission of the world championship heavyweight boxing match between Max Schmeling and Jack Sharkey on June 12, 1930, from Yankee Stadium in New York, USA was transmitted. It was the second major sporting event to be broadcast live on radio and was heard throughout Europe. Jack Sharkey was disqualified in the fourth round for making a low blow and thus Schmeling was named world champion. There were no groin protectors at that time.

In 1930, SÜRAG put a medium-wave transmitter into operation at Mühlacker, the first German large-scale radio station. By January 1932 at the latest, Formis was manager of SÜRAG's technical department.

On February 15, 1933, a speech by Adolf Hitler in the Stuttgart Stadthalle in front of 10,000 supporters was broadcast on the radio. At Werderstraße 14, opponents of the Nazi party close to the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) succeeded in interrupting the broadcast by cutting the above-ground radio transmission cable. Those involved, Eduard Weinzierl, Alfred Däuble, Hermann Medinger, and Wilhelm Bräuninger, were caught in 1935 and sentenced to serve prison terms from twenty-one to twenty-four months for endangering official telegraph operations. Theodor Decker, an employee at the telegraph office, was later arrested on March 11, 1933, under suspicion of orchestrating the idea behind the protest. He died in 1940 in the Mauthausen concentration camp. Formis was also briefly under suspicion. The director of the technical testing center of the SÜRAG, Dr. Albert Kofes, along with the director of the telegraph construction office, were both held responsible for the offense and suspended from their positions.

On March 21, 1933, the »Decree of the Reich President⁷ for the Defence against Insidious Attacks against the Government of National Uprising« was issued in

1934 which resulted in the so called Insidious Attacks Act (*Heimtücke-gesetz*), which states:

§ 1 (1) Whoever has in his possession a uniform of an association which is behind the government of national uprising without being authorized to do so as a member of the association or otherwise, shall be punished with imprisonment for up to two years.

On April 1, 1934, SÜRAG was dissolved and replaced by Reichssender Stuttgart. After the Nazi Party (NSDAP) seized power (the *Machtergreifung*) and the stations were brought into line (*Gleichschaltung*), Alfred Bofinger was the only remaining member of the board of directors of the RRG to retain his post in 1933 and held office until 1945 – at least nominally – as the director of the Reichssender Stuttgart, which broadcast until April 5, 1945.

On April 24, 1934, Formis crossed the Czechoslovakian border (near Hamry and Markteisenstein/Zelézna Ruda) with Karl Böck and traveled onward by train to Pilsen. During a raid on the Bristol Hotel, Formis and Böck were apprehended by the police. They claimed to be in conflict with the Nazis because they were close to the Social Democratic Party and declared their intention to obtain a visa in the capital to proceed to Turkey, to establish a new life.

The Schloss Solitude's long-distance reception station built by Formis and his team became part of the NSDAP regime's espionage apparatus around the mid-1930s as the Landhaus interception station.

Through a refugee aid committee, Formis and Böck found a room together in Prague at Havlickovo náměstí and attempted, in vain, to obtain visas to leave the country. Penniless and stuck, Formis eventually took on a job for the Black Front⁸ as a magazine distribution manager. Leader, Otto Strasser quickly recognized the benefits of Formis's brilliant technical skills for his organization and later commissioned Formis to build a secret transmitter to broadcast anti-Hitler propaganda to the Reich. They set up in a country inn named Hotel Záhoří, on the Vltava River, which today lies in the waters of a reservoir. The DIY transmitter had an output of 100 watts.

Formis also adjusted the antenna of Landschaftssender Berlin radio station in such a way that it could not be received within a radius of about twenty kilometers, which was supposed to make it difficult to locate the station. According to the Black Front's own information, the underground station was broadcast daily from 1p.m. to 3p.m., as well as in the evening from 11p.m. However, according to other outside sources it allegedly

broadcasted daily from 7 p.m. to 3 a.m., but it is likely there were probably much shorter broadcasting times. The program consisted of news, commentaries, calls for resistance, and its signature tune, »Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre,« better known as the »Toreador Song« from Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*.

The Landschaftssender Berlin is said to have broadcast on wave 48.5 m, corresponding to about 6185 kHz. The first German station, Königswusterhausen, broadcasted Formis's Berlin program on the shortwave frequency 6140 kHz. The proportion of listeners increased continuously during the Third Reich. In 1934, 33.3 percent of all households were equipped with radios, the number rose to 65 percent in 1938. The installation of wireless radios in schools, factories, and other public outlets increased the number of listeners beyond the privacy of the home. National Socialist propaganda could thus reach more and more people. Alas, the Black Front broadcasts did not go undetected by the German and Czechoslovakian authorities and various measures were initiated to find the pirate radio station. For example, the head of the Reichsführer's Security Service (SD), SS⁹ Reinhard Heydrich assigned Alfred Naujocks, a

driver and entry-level employee for the SS, and Werner Götttsch with the special task of kidnapping Formis, thus eliminating the dissenting radio station.

On the night of January 23, 1935, Formis was killed at the Záhoví Hotel near Slapy in the Prague-West District. The perpetrators, Alfred Naujocks, Werner Götttsch, and their accomplice Edith Kersbach, successfully escaped back into Germany. The Czechoslovakian police investigated for murder and seized the secret transmitter at the crime scene, which was later transferred to the collection of a museum in Prague. After this, Naujocks achieved dubious recognition as the »man who caused World War II,« but with another radio-related case called the Gleiwitz incident.¹⁰ In the late 1950s, several German public prosecutors investigated Naujocks for a series of crimes, with none of the investigations leading to indictment.

After being shown for the first time on loan to the exhibition *Acting Decently – Resistance and Volksgemeinschaft 1933–1945*.¹¹ Formis's transmitter remains missing without a trace since 2013. Formis was buried in the church cemetery in Slapy, Czech Republic; and local amateur historians maintain his grave to this day.

Niki Matita is a Berlin-based artist and cultural worker. Her main focus is on radio, sound art, installation, and social sculpture. With the radio show *La Passante Ecoutante*, she explores different places, urban spaces, and landscapes by walking and listening with local company. Her traveling micro-radio studio *KOFFERradio* combines ethnography, musical practices, and international networking. Matita was a fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude from November 2021 until March 2022 within the framework of *Under Utopia*.

To listen to the accompanying audio material, please access the online version of *Solitude Journal 5 – A Sound Was Heard!*



You will find the following material:

Niki Matita, *Fernempfangsstelle*, 2024, Radio play in Czech

- 1 Synonymously called Südfunk.
- 2 Ethnological museum of Stuttgart
- 3 A DE number was issued only once and was not re-issued when a member died or left the radio club. This was – and is – not the case with call signs, which occasionally led to confusion, especially after the war, because of double assignments.
- 4 A call sign is a unique identifier for a transmitter station.
- 5 The National Broadcasting Corporation of Germany.
- 6 Regarding the equipment of the long-distance reception station, documentation from 1928 states:
»A receiver with a wave range up to 20,000 meters (five tubes 1 v 3), one receiver with wave range 1000–4000

meters (three tubes 0 v 2), two Neutrodyne receivers, wave range 200–2000 meters (six tubes 3 v 2), one Reiss control receiver, which also serves as a preamplifier for the briefing microphone. In addition, a shortwave receiver, wave range 10–150 meters, and two wave meters for short waves. The circuit of the shortwave receiver is the well-known quick circuit in which the feedback is controlled by a capacitor bridging the anode battery and the primary winding of the amplifier input transformer.«

7 At the time, Paul v. Hindenburg.

8 The Combat League of Revolutionary National Socialists (*Kampfgemeinschaft Revolutionärer Nationalsozialisten*, KGRNS), more commonly known as the Black Front (*Schwarze Front*), was a political group formed by

Otto Strasser in 1930 after he resigned from the Nazi Party (NSDAP).

9 Protection Squadron (Schutzstaffel) – a major paramilitary organization of the NSDAP in Germany.

10 The Gleiwitz incident (*Überfall auf den Sender Gleiwitz*; Polish: Prowokacja gliwicka) was a false flag attack on the radio station Sender Gleiwitz in Gleiwitz (then Germany and now Gliwice, Poland) staged by Nazi Germany on the night of August 31, 1939.

11 *Anständig gehandelt – Widerstand und Volksgemeinschaft 1933–1945*. May 9, 2012 to April 1, 2013. Special exhibition at the Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart.