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The many lives of Bertha, Georges and Jean: a transgender mystic in interwar Belgium

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ABSTRACT
This article addresses the religious career of a transgender mystic who died as Père Jean in 1967. While it might sound contradictory, for scholars working on women, mysticism and charisma, sources on Jean’s life offer exceptional insights. When Jean made the news in the 1920s, he headlined as Bertha Mrazek/Georges Marasco and was still perceived as a woman. Bertha’s cross-dressing, miraculous cure and law suit started discussions about what it meant to be a charismatic woman in post-war Belgium. Rather than focusing on the sensational aspects, the emphasis here is on Jean’s reinventions, the historicity of his appeal to others, and the importance of ideals of gender and sanctity as well as the historical context in the reception of this transgender mystic.

Introduction: the death of Père Jean

On 26 December 1967, death visited Père Jean. Days of grief and mourning followed, during which his body lay in repose in the chapel of his home in Brussels. His friends and followers decorated the room with flowers and took numerous pictures to cherish and preserve the memory of a man they had all loved. While it might seem odd to begin an article in a themed issue on charismatic women with the death of a ‘priest’, starting with the end of the story seems like the best way to introduce the charismatic woman, Bertha Mrazek, who initiated a movement and founded the chapel in the 1920s. She later identified as a man, first taking the name Georges, before becoming Père Jean.

Bertha Mrazek1 was born on 11 December 1890, the daughter of a Belgian mother and a Czech father. Her family situation was rather difficult and it is said that her parents put her out on the streets when she was in her teens. Information is sparse, but she allegedly joined the Van Been Brothers’ troupe as the lion-tamer ‘Gloria’/‘Georgia’ (as rumour has it, her favourite lion, Brutus, slept next to her at night). Other sources describe her as a nightclub singer at the Minerva (in Brussels) and Le Chat Noir. As the latter turned out to be some sort of academy for amateur artists, we might put some question marks next to this second story (although the notion she was a lion-tamer seems even more fantastic).

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The only fact that is more or less certain in relation to this period is that she had a daughter in 1913 (2 April), who was named Irene-Adèle.2

During the First World War, she worked as a guard in Saint Gilles prison. Rumour had it that she had collaborated with the Germans, but an inquest after the war did not find incriminating evidence. Meanwhile, Bertha’s health had suffered during the war, and in 1919 she claimed to no longer be able to move – that her arms and legs were paralyzed and that she had also lost her eyesight. As a last resort, she decided to ask the Virgin for help and went to the Basilica in Halle in July 1920, where she was instantly cured. Bertha was not the first to claim such favour from the Virgin. Favours such as these had been reported for centuries and were frequently covered by the Catholic and secular press. Unlike other cases, however, Bertha’s fame did not diminish after a few weeks, with a loyal group of followers remaining from the initial group of enthusiasts around her cure. Bertha continued to attract their attention, becoming a ‘victim soul’ suffering for the salvation of others, developing stigmata and uttering prophecies.

Prophecies and mystical phenomena such as those associated with Bertha were not uncommon in periods of distress, as her contemporaries seemed to recognize. In 1915, the Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston, who was interested in different types of mystical phenomena, noted that at times of disasters and great wars, there were frequent reports of revelations and prophecies – people grasp at anything and the requirements are less stringent.3 Perhaps this partly explains why Bertha’s followers remained loyal, even after she was arrested for fraud, and also when she was transferred to an asylum, as directed by medical experts appointed to the case. This support was maintained into the 1930s and beyond, when we find Bertha, now Père Jean, receiving his followers in a castle in Essenbeek and in his private chapel in his home in Brussels. The visits continued until his death in 1967.

Even this short summary of Jean’s life already has a sensational ring to it, which risks reducing his life story to an oddity, an exceptional and therefore inconsequential biography. It brings us dangerously close to adopting one of the narratives (trivialization, the presentation of the subject as non-representative) that Judith Halberstam has detected in the representations of transgender subjects by non-transgender people.4 In the following pages, I hope to avoid this grand narrative or a description of Jean as a woman ‘all along’, or a ‘failed’ man.5

Nevertheless, the ‘sensational’ will play a role in the following pages, as it was the tone of the narrative adopted in the newspaper articles on Bertha Mrazek in the 1920s. When Jean made the news as a religious leader in the 1920s for making money under false pretences, he headlined as Bertha Mrazek/Georges Marasco and was still perceived as a woman. However, during this time, Bertha/Georges had already started to dress as a man and it was precisely the ambiguous impression that Bertha made that prompted contemporaries to comment on appropriate gendered behaviour, making usually unspoken gender ideals explicit. As Bertha had already taken on a religious role, these reflections were interwoven with debates on what ‘real’ mysticism was. Thus, while at first glance Bertha’s life story might seem an unsuitable example for more general reflections, for scholars working on women, mysticism and charisma, the discussion of Bertha’s religious career offers us exceptional insights into the ideas about gender and religion that reigned in interwar Belgium.
At the same time, a caveat needs to be made concerning this micro-historical perspective. It is very difficult to ‘hear’ Bertha’s voice, and even those of her followers. They left no documents and the latter are rarely mentioned in the sources that have been preserved. The information about Bertha’s life thus comes to us through voices of others, who met and commented on her and her appeal to others. The focus is therefore primarily on the interwar period when Bertha’s case was reported in the press on two occasions: in 1920, when she claimed to have been miraculously cured; and in 1924, when she was brought to trial. This visibility stimulated her contemporaries to comment; firstly, on her reinvention as a religious leader, which triggered further comments on her multiple identities, her methods of staging herself and her troubling past. These comments provide us with insights into Belgian post-war society, in which mistrust, anonymity and social mobility played important roles. Secondly, in the discussions about her eccentricity, her clothes and identification as a man, the sources document Catholic conceptions of gender – both their rigidity and flexibility – in discourse and practice. Finally, the descriptions of Bertha’s religious career allow us to reflect on conceptions of mysticism and sanctity (and their gender connotations). In the following pages, we will show how these three aspects interacted in the formation of judgements concerning the credibility of Bertha and her religious turn, as well as her influence on others (deemed ‘unhealthy’ or ‘saintly’).

On this basis, we will address the notion of charisma in the Weberian sense, considered as ‘a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’. Charisma is thus viewed from a relational perspective and not as an innate quality. As Charles Lindholm put it so aptly: ‘Weber […] recognized that, no matter how absurd it might seem for an outsider, the leader’s sacredness exists if followers believe in and experience its existence’. While we can only hint at the motivations for Bertha’s followers believing in her capacities, we can easily track the reasons for other contemporaries rejecting Bertha as a religious leader and saintly figure, as the following will show. Changes in conceptions of official (post-mortem, Vatican-approved) sanctity have been addressed by various scholars, as were the trials of fraudulent mystics. However, the historicity of the appeal of those regarded as ‘living saints’ by the people, and the dependence of this appeal on changing criteria such as gender, health and even political circumstances, have rarely been noted. The exceptionally rich sources on this early twentieth-century case allow us to address the response to and evaluation of this appeal more closely.

The following will adopt the language and logic of the sources. Therefore, for those episodes in which Jean is still perceived as Bertha and uses the name or the pen-name Georges Marasco, the text will refer to Bertha and/or Georges rather than Jean.

Post-war society: anonymity and mobility

On 22 November 1924, shortly after Bertha Mrazek was arrested for making money under false pretences, fraudulent behaviour and posing as an apostle and healer, the Belgian Catholic newspaper, La Nation Belge, published a letter about her by Baron van Zuylen von Nyevelt. The Baron knew her case well, for he had led an inquest (25/11/1918–2/5/1919) on Bertha’s relationship with the German occupiers during the Great War, when
she worked in Saint Gilles prison as a guard (see Figure 1).12 While there was not sufficient evidence to convict her, he described her case as ‘suspect’ and added that she had most probably collaborated with the Germans.13 Nevertheless, since Bertha had not been convicted for her activities, she had been able to make a career after the war. According to the Baron, she had the chaos of post-war society to thank for this. Dubious individuals of various origins, imposters like her, he claimed, could easily find their way in the main centres such as Brussels and the coastal areas in the summer, especially in a country such as Belgium – at the crossroads of Europe.14 In his opinion, Bertha was an ‘adventurer’ who owed her success and long career to the uncertainties of post-war society and the influx of strangers.

Thus, during the First World War, we find Bertha in the military hospital of Saint Gilles, where she – at least according to some contemporaries – started to collaborate with the Germans. Given the fact that Bertha was never officially or publicly condemned for this, it is not surprising that alternative stories about Bertha’s activities in Saint Gilles prison could circulate in the aftermath of the war. ‘Mobility and anonymity’, so Matt Houlbrook has noted in his work on tricksters taking on multiple identities, ‘provided opportunities for personal reinvention and social advancement’.15 Each story made sense in the context in which they circulated. As scholars working on history, lies and multiple identities have shown,16 in order for this rescripting to be successful, the subjects draw upon existing roles, as well as commonplace vocabularies and stories. If these redefinitions are to be plausible, they must be recognizable by particular audiences. In other words, they tell us something about their historical and social context. In Bertha’s case, the reinventions drew upon stereotypical figures from wartime stories: the heroine

Figure 1. Photograph of Bertha Mrazek from her time as a prison guard in Saint Gilles prison (private collection K. Smeyers ©).
and the martyr of war. A letter concerning a fundraising episode organized by Le Chat Noir to collect money for a wheelchair described her as ‘beloved heroine and martyr’.17 Similarly, in the context of this campaign for financial support, a medical file on her (June 1920) reported how the war invalid had been a kind of guinea pig for the German physicians. Bertha seems to have claimed that they had done some ‘tests’ on her in Saint Gilles prison, attempting to disturb her mental equilibrium. Both the fundraising episode and the medical file cast her as a war victim who should be pitied.18

Bertha’s past caught up with her when she reinvented herself once more, this time as a *miraculée*, on 19 July 1920. She stepped into the spotlight once again when she claimed to have been miraculously cured by Our Lady of Halle. The members of Le Chat Noir later testified that this was the moment they realized they had been tricked by the ‘adventurer’ into organizing the fundraiser.19 They were not the only ones who had doubts about her miraculous cure.

Bertha’s new fame as a *miraculée* brought her to the attention of those who had known her during the war. Their comments show how Bertha’s profile could also fit another post-war stereotype, the collaborator. The former inmates of Saint Gilles prison did not really know how to respond to her sudden popularity as a ‘semi-saint’. Should they start a campaign? Could they do something about it? It was frustrating to see that ‘a person who collaborated with the Germans’ was now inhabiting ‘the niche of a saint rather than in jail’.20 Jeanne H., for example, vividly remembered the daily talks she had with Bertha during the war and was convinced that Bertha was not trustworthy.21 Bertha, she noted, pretended to never sleep and to hardly eat at all. Moreover, she:

> told me quite some stories about herself, each one more unlikely than the other and very contradictory. That amused me, and I let her talk … I need to thank her, for without her knowing it, she gave me real moments of pleasure in prison, I can still see her reciting verses of her own composition, of which I could not understand a word, and which made me laugh until I cried. … she is an ill person. Thus, do not believe anything she tells you, for she might be lying to you …

Fanny B., another former inmate of Saint Gilles prison, reflected on how Bertha could have become such a success. In her opinion, it was the news coverage that caught people’s attention.

> You can guess my surprise … to see young men, young girls from the countryside … priests, corresponding with Marasco (‘la Marasco’). She was even exchanging poems with one of the latter. How did this happen? Quite simple! When the article appeared, everyone wanted to congratulate her, wanted to have a word with the *miraculée* (a relic ‘quoi’!!). She responded with letters that only a saint could write. I have read them, the poems as well.

In Fanny’s opinion, fame had increased Bertha’s attraction.24 Bertha’s reinvention, however, only ‘worked’ because she knew how to respond to her ‘fan mail’ and write as a ‘saint’.

**Gender and Catholicism**

**Catholic feminine stereotypes: miraculée, suffering soul and prophetess**

There is more than one way to become a celebrity … Amongst other ways, you might choose this: to cure oneself miraculously and perform miracles. (P. Pauwels, 14/11/1924)
Bertha became a religious celebrity the moment she claimed to have been miraculously cured by Our Lady of Halle. The event was described in detail in an article in the Catholic newspaper, *La Libre Belgique*, published at the time of the cure (‘A cure at the shrine of Our Lady of Halle’, 27 July 1920) describing how Bertha and her companions (her priest, a nurse and a former soldier) arrived in Halle (below, the translation of the Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston in his chapter on Bertha in his book, *Surprising Mystics*, 1955). She was brought to the altar more dead than alive, dressed in a long nightgown.

Suddenly, the sick girl, who had been paralysed for a year and blind for two months, lifted her arms, joined her hands and staggered forward a step or two. They caught her and laid her down again. But she rose a second time, climbed up the steps of the altar unaided, and there knelt down and prayed fervently. She said to M. le Curé, ‘I am entirely cured. Look at my hands – and besides, I can see’. The church by this time was full of people. M. le Curé of Forest intoned the Magnificat, after which the girl sang three verses of a cantique in thrilling tones, of which she had herself composed the words: J’irai la voir un jour.26

Bertha’s cure was reported in the local and national Catholic press.27 Doubts about the authenticity of the cure and Bertha’s honesty permeated the news coverage, and some of her supporters felt obliged to protest against accusations of her being a fraud. On 11 July 1921, Bertha’s supporters wrote to the archbishop, providing him with medical information on her case and informing him that ‘[a] committee has been created in order to defend the honour of Miss Bertha Mrazek, alias George Marasco, artist-painter-writer and war invalid’.28 They also asked permission to install a painting of the cure scene in the basilica in Halle (Bertha painted it herself).29

As suggested above in the comments about Bertha’s ‘saintly’ letters, Bertha took care to present herself in an appropriate way in the aftermath of the event. A journalist from *La Libre Belgique* reporting on her miraculous cure described his visit to her: ‘Suddenly, she throws the door wide open and appears before us, a white figure dressed in the same long nightgown she had worn on the nineteenth.30 He also gave an elaborate description of the room in which the interview took place, as well as Bertha’s appearance. He mentions a curious Italian Madonna on the mantelpiece, self-portraits by Bertha, a skull with a pipe in its mouth and a Prussian helmet. Against the wall, there was a Belgian flag:

to which she has pinned a number of her own portraits. There you may see her framed in palm branches and flowers, with streamers bearing complimentary inscriptions, some from the staff of the Belgian Quartermaster-General, others from the artists’ club to which she belonged.31

In the interview, Bertha, pen-name Georges Marasco, called herself a born poet and painter and referred to the great services she had rendered the Belgian cause during the war as well as her espionage activities afterwards.32 Every element in this scene, the dramatic dress, the self-description and the decorations, reveals how Bertha highlighted certain aspects to create a good impression as a patriotic, fragile, almost angelic being.

A miraculous cure by no means implies that the beneficent is a saintly person nor does it necessarily qualify them to become a religious leader.33 How, then, did Bertha maintain the attention of her followers after she had been cured in the basilica of Halle? There were numerous miraculées (especially those from Lourdes), who, in most cases, caught people’s attention for a short period (during the weeks after their cure) and then disappeared from
sight (at least on the national level; on the local level, they often remained celebrities). One of the reasons why Bertha continued to attract attention is that she seems to have taken on yet another role and managed to turn herself into a kind of healer. We can discern this, for example, from a letter by a concerned father to the bishop. He noted:

… that M. practices medicine in secret and she makes the people who address her believe that she takes upon herself, during a period of nine days, the ailments from which she, with her art combined with a novena, delivers them.

In other words, she claimed to have the gift of substitution, ‘that is to say, she was permitted to take upon herself the maladies and sufferings of others’. Her claims of reparatory suffering took on a more heightened physical form when she maintained that she went through Christ’s Passion every Friday and carried the stigmata. She circulated photographs of herself (in different poses) among her followers, revealing her wounds (see Figure 2). This posturing, and the mere fact that she was circulating these images, triggered the mockery of some journalists, who criticized her all-but-natural pose. Her followers, however, believed that ‘many wonderful cures’ had been obtained through her and ‘many remarkable conversions’ had occurred.

Marasco also claimed to have received a mission of a ‘religious and patriotic’ nature, which was undoubtedly not out of place in post-war Belgium. The First World War had seen the rise of apocalypticism, prophecies and visions, but also of patriotic reinterpretations of Catholicism. Bertha seems to have borrowed from both traditions in her reinvention of herself as a religious leader and new Joan of Arc. Her warnings about an imminent purgative period (which she situated between 1923 and 1926), and the dangers of Bolshevism, mirror the apocalyptic worldview of the post-war years. In addition, Marasco also claimed that she suffered from diabolical attacks and conversed with Our Lady and angels on a daily basis.

Each of the religious roles assumed by Bertha – miraculée, suffering soul and prophetess – reflected gendered expectations of her contemporaries. By far the majority of the miraculées reported in Lourdes, for example, were female, and a victim spirituality was, as Paula Kane has demonstrated, closely linked to ideas of femininity and self-sacrifice. Even in relation to her role as prophetess and visionary, there were recent well-known precedents.

Figure 2. Photographs of Bertha Mrazek as stigmatic (private collection K. Smeyers ©).
making it very likely (and thus acceptable) that a young woman would claim to have received divine messages. In the case of the French woman, Claire Ferchaud, for example, who, during the First World War, claimed to have received a mission from Christ to save her fatherland, there were similar comparisons with Joan of Arc. Bertha thus reflected the narratives and feminine stock-images of the miraculées, suffering souls and prophets. It is unclear, however, to what extent Bertha wanted to stress the gendered nature of these stereotypes (even though her contemporaries did), for, rather than emphasizing her femininity, Marasco was already insisting on being called ‘Georges’ rather than Bertha. The more explicit and visible this gender shift became, the more problematic Marasco’s gender became for her contemporaries.

The importance of gender: Bertha and Georges

The transition from Bertha to Georges and later to Jean is difficult to follow. What we can reconstruct, however, is that ‘Georges Marasco’ had already emerged during the First World War, possibly even earlier. It was not just a nom de plume or an artistic alter ego, as some of the newspapers later seemed to suggest by writing Georges into a tradition of cross-dressing artists. While the prisoners of Saint Gilles described her as being ‘of average height, black-haired, very fine and elegant and very pretty’, she called herself Georges Marasco or ‘Monsieur George’ (see Figure 3). Furthermore, by the early 1920s, Marasco seems to have adopted men’s clothing. Because Bertha ‘presented herself in the churches and even at the Holy Table in men’s clothes’, the ecclesiastical authorities decided to intercede and she was excluded from Holy Communion. This decision might seem rather severe, but it reflected the general attitude of the Church against women adopting men’s clothing and hairstyle. While the prohibition was to be observed by the faithful in their daily lives, it could definitely not

Figure 3. Photograph of Bertha Mrazek (private collection K. Smeyers ©).
be disobeyed in church, as this was an important site of gender differentiation and Catholic socialization. Similar exclusions from churches – describing the women involved as ‘crazy men’ (‘zot manvolk’) – were still reported in the late 1930s in Belgium.50 One Catholic author remarked that a short haircut gave the impression of ‘frivolity and laxity that does not promise much good for modesty’. Moreover, it was suggested the hairstyle was not aesthetically pleasing, giving women ‘the look of a plucked or a moulting bird’.51 This was, after all, a time in which women were expected to cover their heads when attending church. While the reason for this rule was debated (modesty or confirmation of women’s subordinate position), it is clear that this set them apart from men, who were to attend mass bareheaded.52

The taboo of gender blending also permeated the Catholic discourse in other countries. In the French periodical, L’Ami du clergé, the immoral aspect of wearing men’s clothes was explicitly addressed in a guideline for the clergy in answer to one of the questions put to the journal in 1933: ‘apart from exceptional cases, that have to be as rare as possible, sexual travesty has to be regarded as rigorously forbidden by moral norms’. Women’s dresses were fit for the ‘particularities of the sex’ and its ‘practical necessities’, and could therefore even be regarded as its ‘distinctive exterior sign’.53

The inappropriateness of Bertha’s clothes and behaviour was discussed in the Catholic newspapers of her time. In De Standaard, P. Pauwels, for example, contrasted Bertha with his ideal type of Catholic girl:

being successful and being eccentric seem to be synonymous for the moment. And because of that our best Flemish girls, who are quiet and modestly dressed and have learned to appreciate domestic bliss at home with mother, remain without invitations, whilst eccentric ladies can decorate each of their ten fingers with a ring. But whether that eccentricity is a guarantee for lasting success remains a completely different question.54

Bertha’s eccentric image made her problematic in the eyes of the Catholic Church and the Catholic journalists, but this was precisely what other journalists found most interesting when they commented on her during her trial. If we look at the British press, for example, Bertha’s choice of men’s clothing was linked to a bohemian element. In this way, Bertha was likened to female celebrities of the time such as Sarah Bernhardt. This famous actress also occasionally dressed as a man and thereby avoided the expectations linked to the female sex, as she was no longer recognized as a typical ‘woman’. Bernhardt’s love for her jaguars, lion and cheetah added to her image.55 Bertha was cast along these lines as well: her past as Gloria the lion-tamer was frequently mentioned, and just like ‘la Bernhardt’, she became ‘la Marasco’ in the press.56 One English newspaper described her as follows:

After the armistice Berthe kept to her male attire, and was a well-known and popular figure at dancing resorts and night cafes, always faultlessly attired in a dinner jacket. She had countless lady friends.57

In the Belgian newspapers, the dress habits of Georges were also a point of interest, with the terms ‘transvestite’ and ‘hermaphrodite’ used alongside each other.58 One Flemish newspaper called her ‘Mieke-Manneke’, a combination of a popular girl’s name and ‘small man’, and at the same time ‘one of the most dangerous women on earth’.59 Transvestism in an artistic setting such as Le Chat Noir was quite different from leading a cultic following dressed as a priest or identifying as a man, as did Georges, and later Jean. A
newspaper cutting (Figure 4) shows how Bertha had reinvented herself as a priestly figure. Her hair is cut short, and she is dressed in assorted white garments and a cape. In the background of the photograph we can see an arched entrance and behind her head a small capital. The chapel-like setting, combined with Bertha’s pose and clothing, demonstrate the care with which she reinvented herself as a religious leader. Of interest, however, is that while most aspects of the later ‘Père Jean’ (short hair and white robe) are already present, the caption still reads ‘Woman faith-healer’.

Bertha’s exclusion from church and the comments in the Catholic newspapers stressed the importance of gender differentiation within Catholic teachings, and the role that clothing played in this respect. There were, however, also rare Catholic exceptions to this rule. It was probably not coincidental that Bertha described herself as a new Joan of Arc. Joan had been canonized on 16 May 1920, only a few weeks before Bertha’s miraculous cure in Halle. Her cause had a very nationalistic undertone (patron saint of France) and she, of course, dressed in men’s clothing to fulfil her mission. Referring to this precedent might have made Bertha’s dress code acceptable to her followers. However, it is interesting that she insisted on a male identity as well. The comparison with Joan of Arc is, therefore, not completely adequate. Although the latter wore men’s clothing, she never identified as a man, as did Bertha/Georges.

Thus, while Bertha’s story in the first stages of her religious phase could be linked to well-known Catholic feminine types such as the miraculée and suffering soul, according to her Catholic contemporaries, her dress habits crossed the moral line of gender differentiation. Attracting followers and becoming the centre of a cult made matters even worse.

**Saintliness and charisma**

*‘False mysticism’ and credulity*

Instead of ‘making herself the centre of a cult, a true saint would have hidden herself with great care in the deepest corner of a convent’. For some of her contemporaries, it was
clear that the cult that developed around Bertha disqualified her from being a saint. However, sanctity is in the eye of the beholder, and while her saintly character was out of the question for some, her followers seemed to have held a completely different opinion. In the following, we will first address the rejections of the 1920s, and then look into the little information we have on Père Jean and his followers, arising from the publications of several articles inspired by Georges’ trial, in which contemporaries reflected on true sanctity, mysticism and why others were attracted to Georges.

As noted, Bertha had been excluded from communion for wearing men’s clothing, and there is no doubt that the ecclesiastical authorities were not in favour of Georges. They had refused to recognize the miracle of Halle and attempted to distance themselves from the case. When Bertha developed a scheme to collect money to replace the organ pipes in a church that had been bombed in Moha (in 1922–1923), they attempted to avoid all association with her. The pastor of Moha, who was keen on accepting the money she had collected, was advised to ‘adopt the greatest caution’ and refuse any financial aid she might provide. While the Church intervened in other cases of alleged stigmatization and other mystical phenomena in the interwar period (e.g. in the case of the stigmatic Rosalie Put, or the apparitions in Lokeren and Onkerzele), it was not the Catholic Church that condemned Bertha/Georges’ religious leadership but the public authorities. Her case, therefore, resembled that of another ‘religious crook’, Benito Pellegri. In the 1930s, Benito had devised a scheme to make money from his alleged miraculous cure at the Marian apparition site of Banneux. In his case, this fraud was only one of many charges laid (including anarchist activities).

Catholics commenting on her case in the newspapers (at the time of her trial), muttered about Bertha’s references to Catholicism, for it was actually the use of features of the Catholic cult, such as candles, ex-votos and devotional practices, that gave irreligious journalists a reason to mock them. According to them, Bertha could not be regarded as a real mystic, she was – at best – an adventurer or feebleminded. In their opinion, this was not true mysticism. Only the Church authorities could decide whether or not supernatural phenomena were real, and ‘true mystics’ had to submit themselves to that authority.

The false mystics, conscient or inconscient mystifiers, protest, declare themselves misunderstood and persecuted, found chapels and end up opposing their individualism to Catholicism. Let’s leave Georges Marasco there, either mad or a thief.

Georges Marasco’s mental health was indeed brought into question, and in December 1924, the verdict of the medical experts involved in the lawsuit was uncompromisingly harsh, describing Bertha Mrazek as suffering from a dissociation disorder or disintegration of consciousness. ‘In our opinion, therefore, the accused is suffering from a hysterical psychosis complicated by mystical ravings and manifestations of mythomania (mania for romancing).’ Bertha was diagnosed as mentally ill, acquitted of the crime and sent to an asylum ‘in the interest of both mental hygiene and of public security’. Consequently, it is not difficult to place her story in the historiographical tradition describing the lives of charismatic religious women whose divine experiences were reduced to fits of hysteria. The medical experts thereby explicitly deemed her appeal to others problematic and mentioned this as a reason for her to be sent to a medical institute, suggesting that ‘[o]ver people of weak mind she exercises an unhealthy influence, because they are contagiously affected by her own mental state’. The Catholic press enthusiastically captured the
verdict of the medical experts in headlines such as ‘Marasco in a health institute’,73
‘Bertha-Georges is insane’ and ‘Marasco is definitely insane’.74 Others called her a ‘sad
creature’ or ‘sick’ and linked her exaggerated imagination (as they described her miracu-
lous cure and healings) to her femininity, while the ‘miracle of Halle’ was depicted as a
comedy typical of women ‘with bad nerves’ (or the result of hypnotism and suggestion).75
While some described her followers as ‘credulous mugs’76 in accepting this ‘new religion’,
others attempted to understand the motivation of those flocking to Bertha. An article in De
Standaard, for example, mentioned the promise of cures that Bertha represented, but also
the need for comfort, support and fortune-telling for the followers.77 The negative verdict
on Bertha, who was deemed either sick or an ‘adventurer’, also had an effect on how her
appeal to others was conceived. Whether as an unhealthy influence or an abuse of credu-
lity, in both cases her followers were cast as victims.

Pro Veritate and Père Jean

Although Bertha failed to meet the sanctity standards promulgated in the press at the time
of her trial (Figure 5), her followers seem to have thought of her as a saintly person.78 They
remained loyal during the commotion of the trial and during the years that she spent in
the asylum, thus disappearing from public view. It is quite telling that the group which
developed around Georges Marasco called itself Pro Veritate (they were officially estab-
lished on 8 August 1930), since ‘truth’ is one of the more elusive elements in all of
these stories. The group of followers seems to have been small, persistent and quite
wealthy – it was rumoured that Bertha’s first house in Forest had been donated by a
rich follower. Newspaper articles hinted at the background of the followers, suggesting
that they came from the higher echelons of society and included ladies of the aristocracy
and even parliamentarians and Belgian and French military officers.79 It is difficult to

![Figure 5. During Bertha’s trial, her wartime past made the news, making her good intentions even more questionable. Here, a cartoon depicting one of Bertha’s followers pleading her case before a senator and referring to acts of patriotism (Private collection K. Smeyers ©).](image-url)
determine the extent to which these insinuations were true. What is certain, however, is
that the group bought a small castle in Essenbeek, Château Bourdon (in 1927),80 where
they frequently spent time from the early 1930s onwards. Marasco seems to have con-
tinued working as a healer and prophet after being released from the mental hospital.

If healings were the main attraction, and the many newspaper articles describing Bertha
as a ‘healer’ suggest this was the case, then Bertha’s profile seems to fit that of the proto-
typical female charismatic leader, who initially attracted her followers and claimed reli-
gious authority primarily through her ‘charismata’ (special gifts, such as stigmata and
substitute suffering), eventually creating her own ‘religion’ on the margins of the main-
stream patriarchal religion.81 Prophets and charismatic leaders often emerge in ‘times
of crisis, dislocation or disorientation’ and Belgian post-war society was no exception.82
Bertha did, however, differ in one important respect: she changed her gender.

While gender fluidity has been a point of interest for scholars working on mysticism for
decades, most of these studies focus on symbolic language and metaphors (e.g. clerical
authors adopting the subject position culturally defined as feminine).83 A shift in the
gender of the mystic in daily practice, beyond the mystical experience, seems to be a
new feature. Moreover, Père Jean thereby seemed to combine the ‘charismata’ of the
initial years – linked to Catholic feminine stereotypes – with the charisma of office, as a
self-styled version of a Catholic ‘priest’ with a private chapel. Thus, similarly to the
present-day charismatic priest studied by Keping Wu, Père Jean was actually ‘unlike the
“pure types” of charismatic leader, who are totally antagonistic to institutional authority’,
and combined ‘the power of charisma and institutional authority’.84 Père Jean was, of
course, never ordained, although some of his followers seem to have thought of him as
a sort of ‘White Father’ (‘Witte Pater’, a kind of missionary).85

While we have little information on his followers in the initial years of the movement,
for the period 1930–2017, they are practically lost from view. However, we can reconstruc-
t the cult dynamic to some extent by analysing the photographs taken after the death of Père
Jean (1967). These document the material setting in which Jean operated, and confirm
some of the thematic focus points that could already be detected in the sources of the
1920s. On one of the walls in the chapel, for example, hung a painting entitled Salus
inforum (Figure 6). It was a reminder of the miraculous cure in Halle in 1920, the
event that had started Bertha’s religious career, and the same painting that the committee
had once pleaded to be installed in the basilica in Halle.86 Such paintings of a miraculous
cure were not exceptional and can be found at various sites linked to Marian devotion (or
the devotions to other saints). What was exceptional, however, was that this painting was
not on display on the site of the cure, but in a small chapel that Père Jean had created in his
house in Brussels. The painting shows Bertha on a stretcher, her hands reaching out to the
Virgin, who appears above her head. A priest (the pastor from Forest) kneels before her, a
soldier to the left mirrors her hand movements, while a nurse watches the scene from her
right. It was a huge painting, covering almost the entire wall.87

The 1967 photographs show how, on the other side of the room, there was a small altar
with a statue of the Virgin and the child Jesus, and below this there was a banner with the
words, ‘May those who do not have faith kneel before this humble altar’. The walls were
covered with ex-votos. It is difficult to decipher the texts, but it seems that some of them
were dedicated to Saint Michael – of whom there was a small statue as well – thanking him
for an exceptional cure. Saint Sebastian, Joan of Arc and statues of other saints were also in
the chapel (Figure 7). To the right of the altar, there were two flags in the national colours of Belgium, carrying the image of the Sacred Heart and a cross. The decoration of the room shows how the Marasco cult built on existing Catholic devotions (to saints, the Virgin and the Sacred Heart) and how the patriotic undertones of the years immediately after the First World War lingered on (with the flags, and also a panel on the war dated 19 July 1945 (?), referring to ‘the glory of God, the fatherland and world peace’). Although the chapel in the house in Forest, as well as Bertha’s leadership and miraculous cure, were never sanctioned by the Catholic Church, it appears that the movement never aimed to break away from Catholicism. As the devotional statues indicate, Jean and his followers still associated with Catholicism and commemorated the miraculous cure of Bertha by attending mass in the basilica of Halle (e.g. in 1947, 1949 and 1952). A photograph found in the home of one of the devotees shows him in a white soutane-like dress, a large cross around his neck and hands held piously (Figure 8). The

Figure 6. Salus inforum, painting of Bertha Mrazek’s miraculous cure in Halle in 1920.

Figure 7. Père Jean on his deathbed in the chapel in his house in Vorst (1967).
chapel and Jean’s wardrobe suggest that, rather than challenging the Catholic Church and the clerical supervision this entailed, Jean aimed to develop an alternative version. The charisma of office was yet again in the hands of someone who identified as a man. Nevertheless, echoes of the initial movement continued, as his charismatic power – in this case, the capacity to function as a medium and pray for others – remained a central characteristic, as the ex-votos show.92 A memorial plate on the wall in the chapel shows how Pro Veritate was not a short-lived experiment – in 1965, the group celebrated a triple jubilee, 45 years had passed since the original miraculous cure, the movement had continued for 35 years and Marasco turned 75.

Epilogue

In judging Bertha’s credibility as a religious leader and her influence on others, different factors were of importance. Contemporaries judged Bertha’s case in the context of the uncertainties of post-war society, the opportunity it offered for personal reinvention, and unease about former collaborators. Catholic conceptions of gender and sanctity were also of central importance, and all these aspects, including the relevant norms and ideals, interacted in the evaluation of her case. In reinventing herself as a religious leader, Bertha initially drew upon existing Catholic feminine stereotypes (miraculée, suffering soul) and well-known narratives about miraculous cures and redemptive suffering.

When the case of Bertha/Georges was reported, her war-time past caught up with her and reflected negatively on the credibility of her cure and later religious career. Bertha was judged according to ideals of Catholic femininity, sanctity and mysticism in early twentieth-century Catholicism, and she was found lacking (e.g. in modesty and obedience). Crossing gender lines and influencing others were even more problematic. Georges was publicly discredited by the Church and public authorities in the 1920s: first through
exclusion from communion and later, after her trial, by being sent to an asylum. The labels
given to Bertha/Georges in the public debates mirrored the criteria that were deemed rel-
evant: she was called an adventurer (typical for post-war society), a hysterical (with weak
feminine nerves), a hermaphrodite (for wearing men’s clothing) and a pseudo-apostle
and false mystic (keen to gain attention). Her followers were described as ‘meek sheep’
and as misled.

However, while the medical experts said she had an ‘unhealthy influence’ on others, the
1924 verdict did not have much effect on Bertha’s followers, who still believed she was a
‘highly privileged soul who disseminated around her an atmosphere of sanctity’.93 Char-
isma’ is, as Gary Dickinson has noted, ‘a matter of perception’.94 While the sources do not
allow us to determine in detail why the followers believed in Georges’ supernatural powers,
we do know why other contemporaries rejected them. We have seen that the perception of
many of Bertha’s contemporaries was influenced by reigning ideas on gender, sanctity,
patriotism and mental health, or, more generally, honesty. Because of the lack of
sources, it is difficult to determine why these ideas did not have an effect on Georges’ fol-
lowers. They remained loyal, as Père Jean offered them prayers, prophecies and interces-
sions in sickness and when facing troubles. Perhaps Bertha/Georges owed this success to
the fact that in the end s/he did not attempt to live up to the expectations of mystical
women and staged herself as a patriot.

While Bertha had her first successes as a miraculée and victim soul, these points of
reference seem to have moved into the background as Père Jean emerged.95 The followers
attending the mass on the anniversary of the miraculous cure in 2017 barely remembered
Bertha, but spoke fondly and respectfully about Père Jean. As a charismatic ‘leader’, he
preferred to emphasize his masculine identity, rather than his female body (not to
mention a daughter), and rather than a mother, he saw himself as ‘papa Marasco’96 and
later Père Jean. This double identity was honoured even after his death on 26 December
1967, with the tombstone reading, ‘B.G. (Bertha/Georges) Mrazek-Marasco’.

Notes

1. As reconstructed in his chapter on her by the Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston, Surprising
2. I have found different ‘explanations’ of the girl’s existence. Most often she seems to have
introduced the girl as her sister, who lived with her. She was probably the love child of
Bertha and a married man (allegedly a painter from Saint Gilles). Bertha herself preferred
to speak about her in the war years as ‘conceived’ during a ‘magnetic’ sleep, as she told
the female prisoners. Archives de la Guerre (ADG). Commission des Archives des Services
Patriotiques établis en Territoire occupé au Front de l’Ouest, IV. Services étudiés,
G. Divers, 1. Dossiers dotés d’un numéro CAP, f. Divers [CAP 540], 3244, Dossier concern-
nant d’éventuelles femmes à la solde des Allemands et infiltrées parmi les prisonnières de
Saint-Gilles et Siegburg. 1920–1921, Jeanne H., to ‘Chère Mademoiselle’, St. Trond, 28
December 1921; ‘La guérisseuse jouait aussi à la prophétesse’, La Nation Belge, November
11, 1924, 1; Thurston, Surprising Mystics, 212.
3. Referring to a series of prophecies during the Franco-Prussian War and the popularity of the
genre since the start of the Great War, he stated: ‘There can in any case be no doubt that an
atmosphere of excitement and unrest is singularly favourable for the propagation of credul-
ities of all kinds’, Herbert Thurston, The War and the Prophets. Notes on Certain Popular
Predictions Current in This Latter Age (London: Burns & Oates LTD, 1915), 1.
5. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 54.
6. The present-day group that still meets once a year (as discussed) could only share some photographs and childhood memories about the life of Bertha, which I have included in the analysis where possible. On the pros and cons of microhistory, see: ‘Microhistory Today: A Roundtable Discussion’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47, no. 1 (2017): 7–52.
11. ‘Une histoire ébouriffante. La femme-prêtre de Forest. Georges Marasco, apôtre et martyr’, *Le Peuple*, November 9, 1924, 1; see also: ‘De wonderdoener van Vorst’, *De Volksstem*, November 20, 1924, 1.
13. A letter from a fellow inmate stated that the Germans allowed her to stay because they felt sorry for her, ADG [CAP 540], 3244, Jeanne H., to ‘Chère Mademoiselle’, St. Trond, 28 December, 1921.
15. Or, as Matt Houlbrook noted, tricksters ‘Paradoxically Seemed Both Universal and Exemplary of their Time and Place’, *Prince of Tricksters*, 5; symptomatic of 1920s and 1930s Britain.
18. ‘et pendant sa détention avoir subi des tentatives d’empoisonnements sous forme de piqûres dans la nuque (?) exécutées par des médecins allemands dans le but de provoquer un déséquilibre mental et provoquer aveu’. Archives of the Archdiocese of Mechelen (AAM), Mercier IV.36, letter from Victor Emotte, dr., 20 June 1920.
20. ‘Et bien jugez de ma stupéfaction … d’avoir vu à la campagne les jeunes gens, les jeunes filles … les prêtres; en correspondance avec la Marasco. Avec un de ces derniers elle échange même des poèmes. Comment est-ce arrivé? Bien simple! – quand l’article a paru, chacun y a été de ses félicitations, chacun a voulu avoir un mot de la miraculée (une relique quoi!!). Elle a répondu des lettres qu’une sainte seule peut écrire. Je les ai lues, aussi les poèmes … une bochined dans une niche de sainte plutôt qu’en cellule’, ADG [CAP 540], 3244, Fanny B., 7/3/1921 à ‘Monsieur le secrétaire’.
22. ‘Nous bavardions un peu, je me défiai et elle me contait un tas d’histoires sur elle-même, l’une au plus invraisemblable que l’autre et très contradictoires entre elles. Cela m’amusaît et je la laissais dire. … Je lui dois de la reconnaissance, parce que à son insu, elle m’a donné de réels moments de plaisir en prison, je la vois toujours me récitant des vers de sa composition et dont je ne comprenais pas qu’elle ose se permettre d’invoquer mon témoignage pour une chose inexistante. Cela prouve une fois de plus que c’est une malade. Ne croyez donc rien de ce qu’elle vous a raconté, car elle vous mystifierait …’, ADG [CAP 540], 3244, Jeanne H. à ‘Chère Mademoiselle’, 28 December 1921.
23. ‘Et bien jugez de ma stupéfaction … d’avoir vu à la campagne les jeunes gens, les jeunes filles … les prêtres; en correspondance avec la Marasco. Avec un de ces derniers elle échange même des poèmes. Comment est-ce arrivé? Bien simple! – quand l’article a paru, chacun y a été de ses félicitations, chacun a voulu avoir un mot de la miraculée (une relique quoi!!). Elle a répondu des lettres qu’une sainte seule peut écrire. Je les ai lues, aussi les poèmes … une bochined dans une niche de sainte plutôt qu’en cellule’, ADG [CAP 540], 3244, Fanny B. à ‘Monsieur le secrétaire’, 7 March 1921.
24. See also: ‘Une histoire ébouriffante. La femme-prêtre de Forest’, Le Peuple, November 9, 1924, 1.
25. ‘Om beroemdheid te verwerven is er meer dan één manier … Er is onder andere de manier: zich-zelf miraculeus te genezen en wonderen te doen’, P. Pauwels, ‘Een goede les voor velen’, De Standaard, November 14, 1924, 1.
28. ‘Dans le but de défendre l’honneur de Mademoiselle Berthe Mrazek, alias George Marasco, artiste-peintre-littérateur et invalide de guerre un comité vient de se former’, AAM, Mercier, IV, spiritualiteit, 36, genezing (te Halle) van Berthe Mrazek. Letter from the committee members (seat of the organization in Ixelles).
29. AAM, Mercier, IV, spiritualiteit, 36, genezing (te Halle) van Berthe Mrazek, Letter from the committee members (seat of the organization in Ixelles).
30. Thurston, Surprising Mystics, 207.
31. Ibid., 207–8.
32. Ibid.
34. See e.g. work of Suzanne Kaufman, her book on Lourdes and its commercial culture described the brief moment of fame of the miraculées. Articles and postcards brought their names to the attention of many. The miraculées recast themselves in their life stories as modern martyrs whose faith in God had challenged medical authorities. Suzanne Kaufman, Consuming Visions. Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 137, 141, 147.
35. ‘… que M. pratique clandestinement la médecine et qu’elle fait croire aux personnes qui s’adressent à elle qu’elle prend sur elle, pendant une période de neuf jours, les maux dont par son art qu’elle accompagne d’une neuvaine, elle les délivre’, Archives Archdiocese of
Mechelen, Mercier, VII, 125 bis, Paul Vrancken, pastor of the church of the Holy Cross in Elsene to Mercier, s.d.

36. Thurston, _Surprising Mystics_, 209.

37. ‘Une histoire ébourrifianta. La femme-prêtre de Forest’.

38. Ibid.

39. Thurston, _Surprising Mystics_, 209.


42. ‘Une histoire ébourrifianta. La femme-prêtre de Forest’.

43. ‘La “guérisseuse”, _La Nation Belge_, November 11, 1924, 1.


46. ‘Elle était de taille moyenne, noire, très fine et élégante et très jolie’, ADG [CAP 540], 3244, Jeanne H., to ‘Chère Mademoiselle’, St. Trond, 28 December 1921.

47. ‘Les œurs néanmoins furent frappées par le fait que cette inconnue insistait vivement pour qu’on l’appelât ‘Monsieur Georges’, bien que portant ses vêtements féminins’, ‘La Marasco espionne’, _La Nation Belge_, November 16, 1924, 1.

48. ‘[…] se présente dans les églises et même à la sainte Table en vêtement masculin’ Quotation of vicar general Van Roey, ‘D’une connue à un inconnu’, _Le Vingtième Siècle_, November 15, 1924, 1.


53. ‘À part des cas tout à fait exceptionnels, et qu’il faut rendre aussi rares que possible, le travestissement sexuel doit être regardé comme rigoureusement interdit par la morale. […] Pour être naturel, son vêtement doit s’adapter à sa constitution, à ses formes, à ses exigences. […] Le costume féminin exigé par les particularités du sexe et ses nécessités pratiques en devient même le signe extérieur distinctif: la femme porte des jupes et l’homme un pantalon, et cela convient à chacun.’ ‘Questions de science ecclésiastique consultations diverses’, _L’ami du clergé_ 50 (July 13, 1933): 434–37, 434. On the debate about the ‘garçonne’ in France, see Mary Louise Roberts, _Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927_.

54. ‘Sucess hebben en excentriek-zijn schijnen synoniem te zijn voor ‘t oogenblik; En daarmee blijven onze beste Vlaamse meisjes, die stil en zedig gedek zijn en bij moeder thuis huiselijk geluk leeren hoogschatten, zonder succes … en zonder uitnodiging, terwijl onze ‘excentriek’ juffertjes hun tien vingeren met een ring kunnen versieren … Maar of dat excentriek –zijn echt en duurzaam geluk bijbrengt is een heel andere vraag’, P. Pauwels, ‘Een goede les voor velen’, *De Standaard*, November 14, 1924, 1.


56. ‘La Marasco espionne’, *La Nation Belge*, November 16, 1924, 1; ‘L’arrestation de la Marasco est confirmée’, *La Nation Belge*, November 21, 1924, 2; ‘La Marasco dans une maison de santé’, *Le Vingtième Siècle*, December 19, 1924, 2.


59. ‘een der gevaarlijkste vrouwen […] die op aarde verblijven’, ‘De wonderdoenster van Vorst’, *De Volksstem*, November 14, 1924, 1.

60. ‘Avec un passé aussi chargé que le sien, une vraie sainte, au lieu de se donner en représentation, de se faire le centre d’un culte, une vraie sainte se fut cachée avec le plus grand soin au fin fond d’un couvent’, ‘Mon idée. Mystique et mystification’, *Le Vingtième Siècle*, November 10, 1924, 1.


63. AAM, Mercier, VII, 125 bis, correspondence of Joseph Bronsgeest, pastor of Moha (diocese of Liège) with archbishop Mercier and canon Dessain, 5 May 1922; 9 May 1922; 19 July 1923; 22 September 1923.

64. ‘user la plus grande circonspexion’, AAM, Mercier, VII, 125 bis, correspondence of Joseph Bronsgeest, pastor of Moha (diocese of Liège) with archbishop Mercier and canon Dessain: chanoine Dessain to Monsieur le curé, Malines, 9 May 1922.


66. On Benito Pellegri, see e.g. A. Magain, ‘De verschijningen van Onkerzele’, *Gazet van Aude-naerde*, September 30, 33, 1.


70. Ibid.


73. ‘La Marasco dans une maison de santé’.
74. ‘Bertha-Georges Marasco est folle’, La Nation Belge, December 3, 1924, 1; ‘La “Marasco” est bien folle’, La Nation Belge, February 26, 1925, 2.
76. ‘lichtgeloovige snullen’, De Volksstem, November 20, 1924, 1.
77. ‘Belooft hun wat troost, wat hulp, wat beloopen, wat waarzeggerij over verleden en toekomst, en ze komen u achterna gelaopen gelijk schapen die in een week geen beet hebben kunnen grazen’. P. Pauwels, ‘Een goede les’.
78. Herbert Thurston seems to have corresponded with one of her followers, who claimed that Bertha was ‘a highly privileged soul who disseminated around her an atmosphere of sanctity’, Thurston, Surprising Mystics, 209.
79. ‘Guérisseuse’, La Nation Belge, November 12, 1924, 1; ‘Une histoire’, Le Peuple, November 9, 1924, 1.
85. See interview August 2017 with M.M.
86. AAM, Mercier, IV, spiritualiteit, 36, genezing (te Halle) van Berthe Mrazek. Letter from the committee, 11/7/1921 (from Ixelles).
87. See interview August 2017 with M.M.
88. ‘que celui qui n’a point la foi vienne s’incliner devant cet humble autel’. See scans of the photographs 1967 of the chapel (collection of the author).
90. Thurston, Surprising Mystics, 216: he had seen ‘photographs of her standing beside the altar of the little chapel in her house, in which she appears to be officiating as a sort of priestess. But I know of no reliable evidence that she aimed at establishing any sort of new cult subversive of Catholic worship’.
91. In 1949, there were approximately 50, in 1952, 100, Lories, ‘Mieke-Manneke’, 34.
92. In 2013, one member of Pro Veritate said that he owed his life to Père Jean. He had only weighed 1.5 kilograms at birth, but claimed that he survived thanks to Marasco’s blessings, Lories, ‘Een ongewoon resident’, 18.
93. Thurston, Surprising Mystics, 209.
96. S.n., ‘La “guérisseuse” jouait aussi à la prophétesse’, La Nation Belge, November 11, 1924, 1.
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