

Vossenberg, from Zondereigen to Blenheim and Detroit

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1. Introduction

In the fall of 1927, not quite 10 years after the end of the Great War, Father Ladislas Segers left Belgium for Canada to work with Flemish (but also Dutch) immigrants in southwestern Ontario.¹ On August 29, 1927, he set sail from Antwerp, accompanied by fellow Capuchin, Father Willibrord Penninx, and arrived in Blenheim (Ontario), where he was to found the first Canadian settlement of the Belgian province of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (O. F. M. Cap.), on September 17, 1927. Later he would recall his departure for the New World as follows:

The waving handkerchiefs on the wharf are now nearly invisible [...]. Night falls. On the deck, together with other immigrants, I silently stare at the far-away lights that outline the country, for which we fought so ferociously in hundreds of battles. A painful, lonely dream in the night.²

(Gazette van Detroit, September 6, 1929, 9)

Nearly a decade earlier, on August 1, 1914, just days before the German invasion, a mobilised Father Ladislas, then a young seminarist, had, like many other seminarists of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, volunteered for active participation as stretcher-bearer. After the fall of the port city of Antwerp, he was sent to the Yser Front where, from October 1914 until Armistice Day 1918, he had the grim task of clearing the wounded *piotten* ('soldiers') from the battlefield, without the protection of a weapon, all the while braving enemy bullets and shell

¹This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies/Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAÉN) held at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, on June 1-2, 2019.

² "De wuivende zakdoeken ginder ver aan de kaai worden onzichtbaar [...]. 't Wordt nacht. Met andere landverhuizers sta ik op het dek zwijgend te staren naar de verre lichten die ons aanwijzen waar het land ligt, waarvoor wij storm liepen in honderden gevechten. Eenzame, pijnvolle droom in den nacht."

fire. For his many acts of bravery and heroism, he received numerous citations, awards and decorations. In 1915, for instance, he was personally awarded by King Albert the Military Cross Second Class Medal during a brief ceremony at the North Sea (Janssen 2004, 26), an event he recorded in his war diary as follows:

[...] the king decorated me and shook my hand [...] While he pinned the war cross on my chest, the king asked me where I was from and added that he was happy he could count on such courageous stretcher-bearers to assist the unlucky wounded.³ (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)



Figure 1. Father Ladislas, between 1914 to 1918 stretcher-bearer in the Belgian army stationed at the Yser front. From the collection of the image bank and archives of heemkundekring ('local history circle') Amalia van Solms (covering municipalities and residential communities Baarle-Hertog, Baarle-Nassau, Castelré, Ulicoten and Zondereigen). Reproduced with permission.

³ “[...] de koning decoreerde mij al mijne hand drukkend [...] Toen de koning het eerekrus op mijn borst stak, vroeg hij mij van waar ik was en zei dat hij tevreden was van moedige brankardiers te bezitten om de ongelukkigen te kunnen helpen.”

The many medals, however, could not erase the trauma experienced on the front lines, where he had witnessed first-hand the horrors of trench warfare.

[...] death was constantly grinning at us on that muddy killing field [...]. The stretcher-bearers were busy [...] all day long. Though we had become hardened, we could still be overcome by mortal fears when we had to pick up human bodies shot to bits and pieces, and put them in bags. And we were out of sorts for several days, when a comrade died in our arms in a horrific death agony.⁴ (Father Ladislav, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)



Figure 2. Father Ladislav, Capuchin Friar, shortly after World War I. From the collection of the image bank and archives of heemkundekring ('local history circle') Amalia van Solms (covering municipalities and residential communities Baarle-Hertog, Baarle-Nassau, Castelré, Ulicoten and Zondereigen). Reproduced with permission.

⁴ “[...] de dood grijnsde gedurig boven dat slijkg doodenveld [...]. De brankardiers hadden daar [...] gansche dagen werk. Hoe verhard ons gemoed ook was, toch geraakten wij soms nog onder den indruk van de doodelijke angsten wanneer wij menschenlijken met stukken en brokken bijeen moesten rapen en in zakken vullen. Wanneer een makker in onze armen gestorven was in een schrikkelijken doodstrijd, dan waren wij een paar dagen uit den haak.”

These memories would forever haunt him. He wrote: “Later, during many feverish nights, these memories would come to torment me like nightmares” (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.).⁵ They would impact his personal, professional and political life, including significantly his writings and his association with Flemish nationalism. Indeed, at the front, Father Ladislas had not only witnessed the birth of the *Frontbeweging* (‘Front Movement’), but had also experienced, on a more personal level, a growing awareness of what he described as the *dienstbaarheid* (‘servitude’) or the *slavenschap* (‘enslavement’) of the Flemish people (Collet 2017-2018). Compelled to act, he penned, while at the front, several articles for the *Belgische Standaard*, a pro-Flemish wartime paper widely read by the *jassen* (‘Flemish soldiers’), joined the *Eglantierke* (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.), one of numerous study groups set up for the cultural and intellectual emancipation of the Flemish troops, and sympathised with the *Blauwvoeten* (‘blue foot birds’),⁶ student-soldiers, stretcher-bearers and army chaplains, who fought for the linguistic rights of the mostly Flemish *piotten* in a predominantly French-speaking Belgian army (Collet 2017-2018).

Now back to 1927, when a war-weary but politically motivated Father Ladislas arrived in Blenheim (Ontario) to cater to the needs of the largely agrarian Flemish (and Dutch) diasporic community which, by this period, had settled throughout rural southwestern Ontario, as well as in the neighbouring American city of Detroit. It should be understood that these communities on both sides of the border behaved as a single institutionally complete diasporic entity; in other words, with their own churches, newspapers, grocery stores, bakeries, schools (Leamington, Blenheim), and various cultural and charitable associations.

As a priest, Father Ladislas’ main task was to care for the spiritual welfare of the *Vlaamse kolonie* (‘Flemish community’) stretching from Blenheim to Chatham, Windsor, Leamington and Erieau, towns that had started to develop sizable Flemish immigrant populations since the 1910s. After the war, many new migrants, often *oudstrijders* (‘veterans’), settled in the area, bringing to the *kolonie* lived memories of the war, of the “injustices” done to the Flemings at the front, of the pressure tactics of the *Frontbeweging*, and perhaps more importantly of the political maneuvering of Flemish activists, such as Dr. August Borms. Their presence, stories, and newly created cultural associations led in turn to

⁵ “Later, in mijn koortsige nachten, zal dat geheugen mij nog verschrikken gelijk een nachtmerrie.”

⁶ Flemish nationalist university students tended to refer to themselves as *Blauwvoeten*. The term as well as the Flemish battle cry, *Vliegt de blauwvoet? Storm op zee!* (‘The bluefoot flies? Storm at sea!’), had been popularised by the Flemish poet Albrecht Rodenbach in one of his student songs, but were originally coined by Hendrik Conscience in his historical novel, *De kerels van Vlaanderen* (‘The rebels of Flanders’), in which the expression is used as a secret password by the *Vlaamse kerels* – Flemish militia men who took part in a 14th century peasant rebellion against Count Louis de Nevers and the king of France, Philippe VI de Valois.

heightened Flemish sensitivities in the diasporic community, as well as to an increased interest in political developments in Belgium, a country very much in turmoil due to the Flemish question. Father Ladislas would come to play a pivotal role in the spread of the Flemish Movement in southwestern Ontario, through his involvement in community events and organizations, his lectures on the Great War, and his writings in the *Gazette van Detroit*, the main Flemish immigrant newspaper.

2. Lectures on the Great War

Soon after his arrival in Blenheim, Father Ladislas started a lecture series on Belgium's role in the First World War, and specifically on the events that had taken place at the Yser Front. He regularly toured the small towns of southwestern Ontario, with a box filled with more than 150 *lichtplaten* ('slides') and a projector provided by fellow *flamingant* ('pro-Flemish activist') Adolf Spillemaeckers, based in neighbouring Detroit. Spillemaeckers was, in fact, a political firebrand, a representative of the *Frontpartij* (a post-war political party originating from the wartime *Frontbeweging*), who had been sent to North America to obtain money and support from the Flemish diaspora (Magee 1987). As evidenced in *De Standaard* of July 4-5, 1987, before his departure for the US, Spillemaeckers had purchased the slides from Ward Hermans, a war veteran and Flemish politician, member of the *Frontpartij*, who in the mid-1920s gave similar lectures, titled *Met onze jongens aan de IJzer...* ('With our boys at the Yser...') (ADV N – Affiche – VAFY95),⁷ to raise funds "*ten bate van 't werk der Bedevaarten*" ('benefitting Flemish-nationalist initiatives for the veterans of the Yser Front') (ADV N – Affiche – VAFY95). The two men, Ladislas and Spillemaeckers, were highly supportive of each other's efforts and regularly corresponded with one another, often ending their letters with the slogan that came to represent the *Frontbeweging*: *AVV-VVK* or *Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Kristus* ('All for Flanders, Flanders for Christ') (ADV N – Fonds Vlamingen in Noord-Amerika – BE ADV N AC530).

One of Father Ladislas' lectures was announced in a newspaper column entitled "*Ons Volk in Canada*" ('Our people in Canada'), and promptly reported on in the next issue:

[...] Next Monday, November 11, **F. Ladislas** will come to Leamington to give a fascinating lecture about the great war in Flanders. What he will tell you

⁷ I am very grateful to the *ADV N archief voor nationale bewegingen (Archief, Documentatie en Onderzoekscentrum voor het Vlaams-nationalisme* in Antwerp) ('archive and research institute for Flemish [and other] nationalist movements') for providing full access to its archives. To facilitate their retrieval, I have inserted in the text the ADV N call numbers of primary sources, particularly posters and private letters that shed light on the events examined in this paper.

he has seen and heard himself during the 4 years he was stationed at the front as stretcher-bearer. He will illustrate his talk with 150 slides, which strikingly depict the battlefield in Flanders [...].⁸

(*Gazette van Detroit*, November 8, 1929, 10)

Around half past seven the evening started with a booming rendition of the “Vlaamsche Leeuw” (‘Flemish Lion’, Flemish national anthem), [...].

Afterwards, **R.F. Ladislas** gave his talk in stirring language that was powerful and to the point. [...]⁹

(*Gazette van Detroit*, November 15, 1929, 10)

The proceeds from the lectures were channeled back to the Flemish Movement in Flanders via Detroit, that is to say, via Spillemaeckers (Magee 1987, 84; Clough 1930, 283-84). In fact, in the late 1920s, the *Vlaamse kolonie* raised money for various initiatives, including the *Ijzertoren* (‘Yser Tower’), a peace memorial along the Yser River in Diksmuide, inaugurated on August 24, 1930, commemorating the fallen Flemish soldiers. The *Ijzertoren* remains up until today a powerful symbol of the Flemish Movement.

3. *Vlaanderen’s Kerels* and Flandria-America

Father Ladislas also worked closely with Flemish-minded societies. In fact, “with the encouragement, openly of Adolf Spillemaeckers and quietly of Father Ladislas, the Flemish Movement in southwestern Ontario grew more successful year by year from 1927 until [1931]” (Magee 1987, 77), the year Spillemaeckers returned to Belgium. Several Flemish-minded societies were organised on both sides of the border, often by former *frontsoldaten* (‘soldiers stationed at the Yser front’). *Vlaanderen’s Kerels* (‘rebels of Flanders’), based in Chatham (Ontario) and Flandria-America, operating out of Detroit (Michigan), were two such organizations.

Vlaanderen’s Kerels was founded on November 29, 1928, by Victor Lanckriet, a businessman and regular contributor to the *Gazette van Detroit*. The association’s name refers to Hendrik Conscience’s 1871 historical novel, *De kerels van Vlaanderen* (‘The rebels of Flanders’), credited with raising Flemish

⁸ “[...] Toekomstige Maandag, 11 November, komt **P. Ladislas** naar Leamington een prachtige conferentie geven over den grooten oorlog in Vlaanderen. Wat hij u vertellen zal heeft hij zelf gezien en gehoord gedurende zijn 4 jaren soldatenleven als brancardier op het front. Daarbij zal hij dat aanschouwelijk voor oogen stellen met een 150 treffende lichtplaten van het oorlogsveld in Vlaanderen. [...]”

⁹ “Om half acht werd uitgezet met een dreunende “Vlaamsche Leeuw”, [...]. Daarna gaf **E. P. Ladislas** ons in een pittige, kernachtige en gesneden taal zijne voordracht. [...]”

consciousness in the 19th century.¹⁰ Indeed, the expression became part and parcel of Flemish-nationalist parlance, and was moreover often used with this connotation by the Flemish diaspora in North America.

Vlaanderen's Kerels had, from the outset, a double purpose: to strive for the betterment of "Our People in Canada," and "to assist the Flemish Movement in Flanders with the goal of supporting by our deeds the betterment of Our People in Flanders" (Magee 1987, 79). It counted among its membership several *oudstrijders*, whose political convictions were still very much rooted in the war experience.

The association was highly critical of the Belgian state, which was very slow to respond effectively to post-war Flemish demands. Flemish war-time activists, such as Dr. Borms, for instance, were granted amnesty more than a decade after the end of the war, a situation that differed greatly from the more lenient treatment of French-language collaborators, such as the industrialist Evence Coppée, and which further alienated the Flemings. As for the *vernederlandising* ('Dutchification') of the University of Ghent, arguably ground-zero of the language conflict, this divisive issue took over a dozen years to play out. These matters and many more were reported on in great detail and in impassioned language in the

¹⁰ The title of Conscience's novel is laden with historical references, and hence rather difficult to translate into English. It is believed that Conscience was inspired by Kervyn de Lettenhove's 19th century opus in six volumes *Histoire de Flandre* ('The history of Flanders'), which considers the 14th century "rebellious 'Churls' or 'Carles' (*Kerels*) mentioned in medieval sources [...] as an ethnic tribe, related to the Saxons" (Leerssen 2006, 206). The class conflict in which the "freedom-loving, oppressed" (Leerssen 2006, 206) *Kerels* were involved in medieval Flanders was reinterpreted by Kervyn de Lettenhove as a racial war between France and Flanders. Conscience's novel, as well as Albrecht Rodenbach's 19th century poems, *Het lied der Vlaamsche zonen* ('The song of the sons of Flanders') and *Het lied der Blauwvoeterie* ('The Song of the Blauwvoeten'), adopted De Lettenhove's interpretation, and their ensuing popularity led to a re-emergence of the old Carle ideals of freedom and self-determination. *De kereel* became a widely used literary motif evoking the Flemish hero who bravely fights for Flemish rights. Similarly, in Flemish-minded circles, *de kereel* became a symbol for Flemish determination and combativeness. As for the title of Conscience's novel, *De kerels van Vlaanderen*, it is translated in various ways. *Merriam-Webster's encyclopedia of literature* (1995, 268), for instance, proposes "The boys of Flanders," a translation which I have retained in Collet (2017-2018), though it obscures the historical and Flemish-nationalist connotations of the novel's title. Academic works dedicated to national movements in general and Flemish nationalism in particular tend to propose more historically relevant translations. The translation offered by Leerssen (2006, 206), and which reflects De Lettenhove's racialised vision, *The Carles of Flanders*, is a case in point. I have, however, adopted neither translation here, preferring instead, *The rebels of Flanders*, which I hope better captures the medieval reference of *De kerels van Vlaanderen* as well as the strong Flemish-nationalist flavour with which the expression was imbued in the time period under consideration.

Gazette van Detroit of the late 1920s, which doubtlessly affected the mindset of the *Kerels* as well as of the diasporic community at large.

Vlaanderen's Kerels organised, among other things, yearly events to commemorate **Armistice Day** (November 11), and perhaps more significantly the **Battle of the Golden Spurs** (July 11), a medieval battle opposing French soldiers and Flemish peasants which, in the 19th century, became a foundation myth for *flamingant* Flemings. *Vlaanderen's Kerels* often called upon Father Ladislas to give a blessing during these events or to say mass, as evidenced by the text from the following newspaper article:

Chatham

FLEMINGS COMMEMORATE YOUR WAR DEAD

It has been nearly a year, and once again we are about to celebrate the 11th of November: Armistice Day! Let's pay tribute to those who died!

[...]

[...] on Sunday, 10 November, [...] mass at 2 o'clock in the afternoon at the same church as last year (Bless Sacrament Church), Victoria Avenue, with a sermon by **Father Ladislas**, and then a parade to the statue [...] where the Death March will be played, followed by two speeches.

[...]

For Vlaanderen's Kerels

President,

V. LANCKRIET¹¹

(*Gazette van Detroit*, October 25, 1929, 12)

Father Ladislas, in turn, strongly encouraged the *Vlaamse kolonie* to attend these events, though rarely openly. Instead, he submitted pieces to the *Gazette van Detroit*, signed Vossenberg, publicising the events. The following text from an article dated November 1, 1929, is a good example of this:

LET'S ALL GO TO CHATHAM!

[....]

Flemish veterans, *Vossen*,¹² we will once again be commemorating our fallen comrades. [...]

¹¹ "Chatham / VLAMINGEN GEDENKT UWE DOODEN / Een jaar is bijna verlopen en weerom staan wij aan den vooravond van het 11de Novemberfeest: Wapenstilstand! Hulde aan onze dooden! [...] den Zondag, 10den November, [...] een lof om 2 ure namiddag in dezelfde kerk van verleden jaar (Bless Sacrament Church), Victoria Avenue, met sermoen door **Pater Ladislas**, vervolgens opmarsch naar het standbeeld [...] alwaar de doodenmarsch zal gespeeld worden, gevolgd met twee aanspraken. / [...] / Namens Vlaanderen's Kerels / De Voorzitter, / V. LANCKRIET"

¹² After the war, many Flemish veterans joined V.O.S. (*Vlaamse Oudstrijders*), a Flemish-minded veteran organization founded in 1919 by former *Yserfrontsoldaten*. They used the acronym V.O.S., which spells *vos* ('fox') in Dutch, to refer to themselves.

Flemings of Canada, let's all go to Chatham on November 10! Let's join the parade of the Flemings, the big parade; let's make it a grand feast for Flanders!
[...]

Vossenberg¹³

(*Gazette van Detroit*, November 1, 1929, 10)

Vlaanderen's Kerels worked closely with its sister-organisation, Flandria-America, based in Detroit, where Father Ladislas' close collaborator, Adolf Spillemaeckers, was one of the founders.

[...] on Nov. 4, 1922, during a meeting at the house of Achiel Temmerman, it was decided to found *Flandria-America* [...]. The founders were the following gentlemen: Camiel Vanden Brulle, Achiel Temmerman, Joseph De Hertogh, Emiel Thomasse, Arthur Vanderhaegen, as well as Karel Wickers, **Adolf Spillemaeckers**, Bodewijn Maes, Tmiel Deckersen, [and] Ward Hermans, who provided assistance from Flanders.¹⁴

(*Gazette van Detroit*, October 18, 1929, 12)

Significantly, at least two of the Belgian-based founders, besides Adolf Spillemaeckers, namely Bodewijn Maes and Ward Hermans were members of the Flemish nationalist *Frontpartij*. Both were successful politicians and served their party in the Belgian Parliament, from 1919-1921 and 1929-1932 respectively.

Vlaanderen's Kerels and Flandria-America represented the political wing of the Flemish Movement in North America, whereas the cultural wing was comprised largely of groups like Gabriel Lecluyse's Netherlandish Dramatic Club, based in Windsor, Ontario. The latter produced Flemish-themed evenings of dance, music and plays designed to help preserve or even inculcate a Flemish cultural and political consciousness amongst the diaspora. The proceeds from these events were also donated to the Flemish Movement in Flanders (Magee 1987, 84).

A personal and political relationship existed between Father Ladislas and the aforementioned Gabriel Lecluyse, originally meeting through religious and

¹³ "OP! NAAR CHATHAM! / [...] / Vlaamsche oud-strijders, Vossen, 't is de herdenking onzer gesneuvelde makers. [...] / Vlamingen van Canada, allemaal, op naar Chatham den 10 November! 't Is de stoet der Vlamingen, de groote stoet; 't is het groote feest van Vlaanderen. [...] / Vossenberg"

¹⁴ "[...] op 4 Nov. 1922 op een bijeenkomst bij Achiel Temmerman werd besloten tot de stichting van Flandria-America [...]. De stichting gebeurde met de volgende personen: De heeren Camiel Vanden Brulle, Achiel Temmerman, Joseph De Hertogh, Emiel Thomasse, Arthur Vanderhaegen, in samenwerking met de heeren Karel Wickers, **Adolf Spillemaeckers**, Bodewijn Maes, Tmiel Deckersen, [en] Ward Hermans in Vlaanderen."

cultural organisations in Blenheim, and continued until Lecluyse's untimely death in 1929. Father Ladislas gave a touching sermon at Lecluyse's funeral mass, and Adolf Spillemaeckers a farewell speech (*Gazette van Detroit*, December 13, 1929, 1). Moreover, and perhaps quite revealing of the nature of their relationship, under his pseudonym Vossenbergh, Father Ladislas also published an impassioned Flemish-minded *In memoriam* in the *Gazette van Detroit* (December 13, 1929, 10).

4. *Gazette van Detroit*

In the late 1920s, the main newspaper of the *Vlaamse kolonie*, namely the *Gazette van Detroit*, was strongly Flemish-minded. In fact, in his 1930 account of the Flemish Movement, Clough (1930, 283) wrote:

[...] few [Americans] know there is a Flemish movement. An exception should be made, however, in respect of the Flemish immigrants located in Chicago and Detroit. Those of the latter city have kept alive a certain consciousness of Flemish nationalism. A Flemish newspaper of Detroit, *Gazette van Detroit*, prints lengthy accounts of events concerning the Flemish movement.

In fact, the *Gazette van Detroit* had successfully weathered the wartime censorship from both the Belgian and American authorities by adopting a pro-Belgian passivist approach to the Flemish question (Collet 2019). In the years following the war, however, the editor-in-chief, Frank Cobbaert, a staunch *daensist* and supporter of the Flemish-minded *Christene Volkspartij*,¹⁵ allowed more open debate of the Flemish question to a wider spectrum within the Flemish Movement, from the pro-Belgian passivists to the anti-Belgian activists. As a consequence, the *Gazette* accepted a range of voices. To cite but a few examples, the writings of Pee Vlaming, Adolf Spillemaeckers' penname,¹⁶ strongly argued the activist point of view, whereas the work of Gaston Veys conveyed more mainstream passivist arguments. As for Jef Dinge, he published weekly Flemish-minded press reviews of that week's political events in Belgium. The debate in the

¹⁵ Follower of Adolf Daens, a Flemish-minded priest and politician who founded the *Daensist Movement* from which originated the *Christene Volkspartij* in 1893.

¹⁶ Spillemaeckers' penname has a strong Flemish-nationalist connotation. It alludes, more or less cryptically, to the Flemish-nationalist epithet, *Vlaamse kereel*. The meaning of the last name, *Vlaming*, is clear: it refers to an inhabitant of Flanders. But the key to decoding the penname is the apparent first name: *Pee*. In the Dutch language, and particularly in the Flemish dialects, *Pee* is not a first name but a noun, in fact a synonym for *kereel*. In Flemish-nationalist circles of the late 19th and early 20th century, the latter noun, *kereel*, had taken on the meaning of a true Fleming, one who staunchly fights for his cultural, linguistic, and political rights, as the Flemish militiamen of the 14th century, also known as *kerels*, had done before him.

Gazette van Detroit surrounding Dr. August Borms clearly illustrated the diverse range of views. Borms, an activist leader and member of the *Raad van Vlaanderen* (a self-proclaimed war-time Flemish Parliament), became a martyr and symbol for the Flemish Movement, following his imprisonment by the Belgian State. Whereas for Pee Vlaming, Borms was a noble Flemish hero on a par with Pieter de Coninck and Jan Breydel, two legendary Flemish heroes of the era of the Battle of the Golden Spurs, for Veys, Borms was simply a German collaborator. Jef Dinge, for his part, painted a more intellectual and politically informed picture of the facts.

Father Ladislas added his voice to the array of opinions soon after his arrival in Blenheim. He regularly sent in pieces to the immigrant weekly that were revealing of his political leanings, but under an alias, namely the aforementioned *Vossenberg*. Pieces with news about the congregation, however, advertising mass times, confession times and community events, such as the popular chickensuppers, were invariably signed *Father Ladislas*. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, both pieces often appeared side by side on page 10 of the *Gazette* under the heading “*Ons Volk in CANADA*” (‘Our People in Canada’).

It is safe to assume that Father Ladislas’ decision to obscure his true identity was in response to the continued policy of the higher clergy to deter pro-Flemish activities among the lower clergy. In 1917, when the Belgian Army intensified its repression of the *blauwvoeterij* (‘Flemish nationalist activities’) in the trenches of the Yser Front, Msgr. Marinis had ordered the stretcher-bearers and army chaplains stationed there to immediately cease all political engagement. Later, after the war, an official inquiry was held to examine the role of the lower clergy in the birth of the *Frontbeweging*. Father Ladislas’ study group had been one of the casualties of that military repression (Collet 2017-2018), an event he clearly had not forgotten. In fact, in a letter sent from Blenheim to Spillemaeckers and dated September 18, 1928, Father Ladislas wrote:

I was so relieved when you advised me verbally to only busy myself with Religion. I have to be so careful.¹⁷

(ADV N – Fonds Vlamingen in Noord-Amerika – BE ADV N AC530)

Vossenberg, Father Ladislas’ pen name, though generally indecipherable for the *Gazette’s* readership (only Spillemaeckers knew of the connection between *Vossenberg* and Father Ladislas), contained at least two cryptic allusions to the author’s true identity. It referred, on the one hand, to Father Ladislas’ birthplace in Belgium, namely Zondereigen, in the province of Antwerp. Indeed, *Vossenberg* is the name of a *motte*, or ‘man-made hill’, in the village of Zondereigen, on which

¹⁷ “Ik was zoo gelukkig toen ik uit Uw mond den raad vernam mij alleen bezig te houden met Godsdiens. Ik heb zoo omzichtig te zijn.”

a *motteburcht*, or ‘wooden castle’, once stood (Janssen 2005), and where Father Ladislas spent many a happy afternoon playing as a young boy. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, *Vossenberg* conveyed indirectly that the author was an *oudstrijder*, possibly a *frontsoldaat*. The word, *vos*, contained in *Vossenberg*, referred almost certainly to the acronym VOS, or *Vlaamsche Oudstrijder* (‘Flemish veteran’). In fact, it seems quite telling that Father Ladislas used *vos* in his writings with that particular post-war meaning.

Flemish veterans, *Vossen*, we will once again be commemorating our fallen comrades.¹⁸ (*Gazette van Detroit*, November 1, 1929, 10)

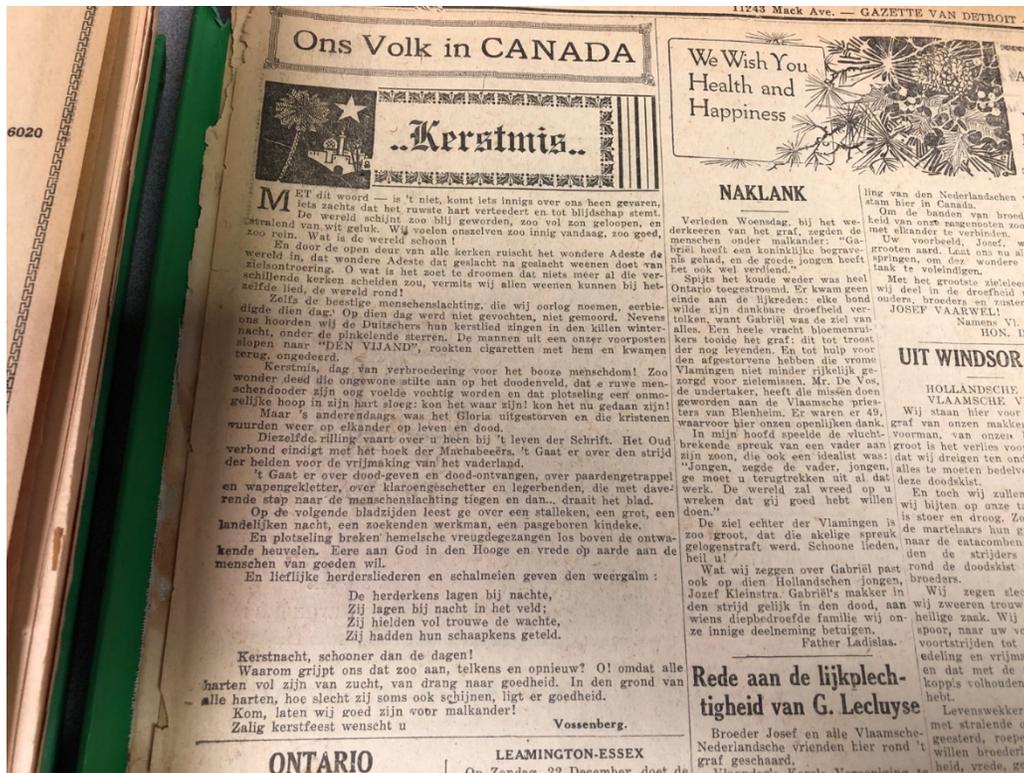


Figure 3. Articles signed “Vossenberg” and “Father Ladislas” in the *Gazette van Detroit*, archived at the Flemish Library of the Genealogical Society of Flemish Americans, Roseville, Michigan, USA. Photo courtesy Tanja Collet.

The acronym stood furthermore for a Flemish-minded organisation founded in 1919 by Jozef Verduyn with the assistance of two *fronters*, Adiel Debeuckelaere and Hendrik Borginon, founders of the *Frontbeweging: the Verbond der Vlaamsche Oud-strijders* (VOS) (‘League of Flemish veterans’). The organisation’s

¹⁸ “*Vlaamsche oud-strijders, Vossen, ’t is de herdenking onzer gesneuvelde makkers.*”

main objectives were to combat militarism, and to reconcile the various streams within the Flemish Movement, from the minimalist Catholic *flaminganten* to the more radical activist *fronters*. VOS was crucial in the organisation of the yearly *Ijzervedevaarten* ('pilgrimage of the Yser'), originally intended as a pacifist and anti-militarist pilgrimage to the *Ijzertoren* to commemorate the fallen, which, in the 1930s, however, took on radical nationalist overtones. It is there, furthermore, that in 1927, Pieter Willem de Koning, chair of the *Dietse Bond* based in Amsterdam, emphasised the cultural and linguistic unity of the Flemings and the Dutch, a speech that was repeated in Aalst on June 10, 1928, and which was reproduced by Pee Vlaming in the *Gazette van Detroit* of July 13, 1928.

Father Ladislas' writings, signed "Vossenbergh," present all of the themes common to VOS. That they were Flemish-minded should be clear by now, and thus no longer needs to be illustrated. That he, a Catholic *flamingant*, worked closely with activist *fronters* should also need no further explanation. What does require attention is that his writings were in essence anti-militaristic, as can be deduced, among other things, from the strongly pejorative expressions he used to refer to the war (for example, *wereldbrand* ['world conflagration'], *beestige menschenlaching* ['barbaric human slaughter']) and to the soldiers who fought in it (for example, *ruwe menschendooders* ('brutal manslaughterers')). He moreover penned pieces passionately arguing in favour of a *vereenigde staten Europa's* ('united states of Europe'), as a means to prevent future violence and blood shed:

All of Europe is now focused on the dream of a united Europe. [...]

The dream [...] is strong and will not die. After the world conflagration of 1914-1918, the League of Nations is tasked once again with the unification of Europe.

Will the dream ever come true?

Vossenbergh¹⁹

(*Gazette van Detroit*, December 13, 1929, 3)

Finally, he firmly believed in the unity of the *Nederlandschen stam* ('Netherlandic people') as argued by Pieter Willem de Koning and advocated by VOS.²⁰

Dutchmen, who believe in the greatness of a unified noble Netherlandic people, go to Chatham!

¹⁹ "De aandacht van gansch Europa staat nu op den droom van Europa een te maken. [...] / De droom [...] is taai en wil niet sterven. Na den wereldbrand van 1914-1918 is het onze Volkerenbond die nogmaals de eenheid van Europa wil bewerken. / Zal het ooit nog werkelijkheid worden? / Vossenbergh"

²⁰ It should be noted here that Father Ladislas' birthplace Zondereigen is part of the municipality of Baarle-Hertog. This Belgian municipality is quite exceptional geographically, as it is made up of a number of enclaves which are situated fully within the Netherlands.

For a great day of fraternisation!
[...]

Vossenberg²¹

(*Gazette van Detroit*, November 1, 1929, 3)

This latter conviction may have cemented Father Ladislav's personal and professional relationship with community leader Gabriel Lecluyse, whose Netherlandisch Dramatic Club also subscribed to the brotherhood of the Flemings and the Dutch, within and beyond the confines of the diaspora in southwestern Ontario.

5. Concluding remarks

To conclude, it is clear from the above that Father Ladislav was a key religious figure in the spread of pro-Flemish activities in southwestern Ontario in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In a July 5, 1987, interview with the Belgian daily, *De Standaard*, fellow *flamingant* Adolf Spillemaeckers admitted, however, that Flemish-minded political initiatives were gradually abandoned by the *Vlaamse Kolonie* in the 1940s, and close to completely after the Second World War.

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²¹ "Hollanders, die iets gevoelt voor de grootheid van den eenen, edelen, Nederlandschen stam, op naar Chatham! / 't Is de groote verbroedering! / [...] / **Vossenbergs**"