

# Summary: The life and work of Léon Verhelst

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## Introduction

Léon Verhelst (1872-1955) was a key figure in the Belgian brewing world and academic life. His impressive career is characterised by a unique combination of entrepreneurship, academic excellence, a broad international network and a deep social commitment. This summary highlights the four key aspects of his life and work.

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## 1. Léon Verhelst and the Artois Breweries

### Early years and growth

Léon Verhelst was born into a West Flemish brewing family and was taught entrepreneurship from an early age. After studying at the Leuven Brewing School, where he graduated with honours in 1891, he began his career as technical director at the Rodenbach brewery. However, his real breakthrough came at the Artois Breweries in Leuven.

### Chairmanship and Innovation

Verhelst became chairman of NV Brouwerijen Artois, a position he held for more than 50 years. Under his leadership, Artois grew into one of the largest and most innovative breweries in Belgium. He was behind numerous investments, such as the construction of new fermentation buildings and the introduction of new beer brands (including BST and Brune Gueuze). His vision combined academic knowledge with practical business management, which led to strong growth and international recognition for the company.

### Crisis management

During both World Wars, Verhelst proved himself to be a resilient leader. Despite exile during WWI and severe damage to the brewery in WWII, he remained the driving force behind its reconstruction. His letters and administrative notes testify to a great sense of responsibility and a pragmatic approach in difficult times.

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## 2. International network and recognition

### European connections

Verhelst built up an impressive network across Europe. Even as a young man, he travelled abroad to learn new brewing techniques and languages. Later, he maintained close contacts with brewers, scientists and industrialists in countries such as Germany, England, France, Austria and Denmark.

### International recognition

His expertise was recognised not only nationally but also internationally. Verhelst was a much sought-after speaker at conferences and published in foreign trade journals. German brewers sent him letters of thanks for his contributions to the sector, and his name was mentioned with respect in scientific and industrial circles. His influence extended far beyond the Belgian borders, contributing to the reputation of the Belgian brewing industry as a whole.

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### 3. The brewing school and the 'father' of generations of brewing engineers

#### **Professor and Director**

After his time at Rodenbach, Verhelst was brought back to the Leuven Brewing School by his former professor Jules Vuylsteke. Here he built an impressive academic career as a professor and later as director.

He was known for his methodical and clear teaching style, seamlessly combining theory and practice.

#### **Pedagogical Leadership**

Verhelst was regarded by his students not only as a teacher, but as a true 'father figure'. He was fair, committed and encouraged his students to become not only technicians, but also responsible and enterprising people. Many of his former students attributed their later success to him and felt honoured to be among his 'disciples'.

#### **Shaping Generations**

Under his leadership, generations of brewing engineers were trained who later took up key positions at home and abroad. His influence on education and the professionalisation of the brewing profession was enormous and is still recognised today.

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### 4. Social Engagement and Humanity

#### **Socially Conscious Entrepreneur**

Verhelst was not only an industrialist and academic, but also a socially conscious person. He was committed to the welfare of his employees and their families. For example, he founded the Verhelst Foundation, which provided social services to Artois staff. His Christian beliefs were the basis of his social commitment.

#### **An eye for the community**

During the war years, he demonstrated his social commitment by, among other things, reserving rice supplies for the civilian population of Leuven and Brussels. Outside the brewery, he was also active in social and charitable initiatives, often quietly and without much fuss.

#### **Personal relationships**

Verhelst attached great importance to family ties and friendships. His warm personality and sincere interest in the welfare of others made him popular with colleagues, employees and students. His death in 1955 was therefore widely mourned in both the brewing world and the academic community.

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# The Verhelst Foundation: Social commitment with lasting impact

In 1949, at the age of 76, Léon Verhelst and his wife took the initiative to donate a significant portion of their assets to a social cause. With legal advice from Raymond Boon, the **non-profit organisation “Fonds President Verhelst”** was established.

The establishment of the foundation was announced during the celebration of Verhelst's 50th anniversary as chairman of Artois in September 1949, where he once again emphasised the importance of the initiative.

## Impact and Evolution

The Fonds President Verhelst quickly became an **example of social entrepreneurship**. In Artois' internal staff magazine, the foundation was praised as an act of profound humanity, which placed Verhelst at the forefront of social figures. The foundation not only offered financial assistance, but also supported the personal and professional development of employees and their families.

## Progressive and Pioneering

Verhelst was ahead of his time: the foundation was one of the first workplace wellbeing programmes in Europe. It offered support for physical and mental health problems and invested in the education and development of staff members' children. All this took place at a time when social services were far from commonplace.

## The Foundation Today

75 years after its creation, the **Verhelst Foundation** is still active and relevant. The foundation has grown into one of the oldest and largest independent workplace wellbeing programmes in Europe.

Today, the foundation works primarily preventively, with the aim of enabling every AB InBev (the successor to Artois) employee to be the best version of themselves. The independence and permanence of the foundation are unique in Europe.

**The Fonds President Verhelst is a lasting monument to Léon Verhelst's social vision and humanity. It illustrates how his commitment to the welfare of others was not limited to his own time, but continues to have a positive impact on thousands of people today. The foundation is a tangible legacy of his belief that entrepreneurship and social responsibility can go hand in hand.**

