



Jorgensen, Christine (1926-1989)

by Teresa Theophano

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Christine Jorgensen, born George William Jorgensen, Jr., was not the first male-to-female transsexual to undergo a series of sexual reassignment operations, but hers was the first surgical sex change highly publicized in the United States. The publicity surrounding her surgery enabled Jorgensen and medical professionals to educate the larger public about the differences between homosexuality, transvestism, and transsexuality.

A second generation Danish-American, Jorgensen was born on May 30, 1926 to George and Florence Davis Hansen Jorgensen, and raised in the Bronx in a large extended family. In spite of a genuinely happy childhood--Jorgensen's memoir contains numerous lighthearted descriptions of her supportive family environment--her self-described "sissified" and modest ways began making her life miserable by the time she entered puberty.

What can only be called a crush on a male friend during her teenage years disturbed Jorgensen deeply. She had read about but disavowed homosexuality early on, feeling that the term did not apply to her. She later expounded upon gayness as "deeply alien" to her Lutheran religious principles.

Subscribing to the era's "deviation" theories regarding homosexuality, Jorgensen never exactly became a champion of gay rights. She remarks in her autobiography, "I had seen enough to know that homosexuality brought with it social segregation and ostracism that I couldn't add to my own deep feeling of not belonging." She reports that she even became physically ill when a man propositioned her while she was still living as a man.

Jorgensen was drafted into the Army in 1945, after having been rejected twice before when she volunteered for service, but was honorably discharged only a year and a half later after a bout of illness.

Following her departure from the Army, she made an unsuccessful attempt at a photography career in Hollywood, but returned to the East Coast to study at the Progressive School of Photography in New Haven, Connecticut. While there, Jorgensen read about an endocrinologist doing hormone experiments on animals. Her interest was piqued, and she soon discovered that the solution to her problem could be in Europe.

In 1950 Jorgensen traveled to Copenhagen and met with Dr. Christian Hamburger, the first medical professional to diagnose her as a transsexual rather than a homosexual.

Hamburger began treating Jorgensen with experimental hormone therapy, and the following year, he and Jorgensen's psychiatrist agreed that she was ready to move on to the next step--surgery. After two operations, word of the brand-new Christine Jorgensen leaked to the press.



Top: Christine Jorgensen boarding a plane in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1953.
Above: A photograph of Jorgensen at a horse race provided by Cleis Press, publishers of a reprint edition of her autobiography. Image of Jorgensen boarding an airplane courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Image of Jorgensen attending a horse race courtesy Cleis Press.

Thrust into the spotlight while still recuperating in the hospital, Christine became an overnight celebrity: the New York *Daily News* broke the story with the headline "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Bombshell." Much time and energy was spent ducking paparazzi and defending herself against slander, but a short time after her return to the United States, Jorgensen met with success as a public figure.

Jorgensen's name was on everyone's lips, whether they ridiculed her or sympathized with her, and intrigue about her case spread far and wide. She had long dreamed of becoming a photographer, but the relentless glare of publicity made it impossible to pursue a normal life.

After some hesitation, Jorgensen opted for a career as a stage actress and singer. Charismatic and photogenic, she cast herself in the role of glamorous and gracious, well-coifed and beautifully gowned lady.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, she toured with a nightclub act in which she sang and did impressions. She appeared to capacity crowds at clubs from Havana to Las Vegas, often earning as much as \$5,000 per week.

The object of enormous curiosity, she even issued a mildly titillating record, "Christine Jorgensen Revealed," in which she answered questions about her transformation.

Jorgensen also lectured frequently about transsexuality and used her unsought celebrity as an occasion for educating others. Her book *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* was published in 1967, and its film adaptation was released in 1970 as *The Christine Jorgensen Story*.

Jorgensen's significance lies in the fact that she ultimately took control of the sensational news of her sex reassignment surgery. The story was at first presented as something titillating and scandalous, but when she presented it as her own story she seized the opportunity to educate the public about transsexualism, especially its status as a phenomenon quite distinct from transvestism and homosexuality.

In addition, the publicity Jorgensen's case attracted served an important function of reassuring other transsexuals both that they were not alone and that sex reassignment surgery might offer hope for them as well. The publicity surrounding Jorgensen's surgery also prompted numerous medical professionals to explain transsexualism and sexual reassignment surgery to an interested public.

Perhaps most importantly, Jorgensen's innate dignity and eloquence helped humanize a phenomenon that has all too often been presented as sensational or risible.

Although she became engaged twice, Jorgensen never married. She lived in Massapequa, Long Island until her parents' deaths in 1967, when she moved to Southern California. She spent her last two years in San Clemente, where she died of bladder and lung cancer on May 3, 1989, at the age of 62.

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