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# SHATTERED

## The Youngest Victims of Belgian Rule

by JOCELYN C. ZUCKERMAN

In its African colonies, Belgium forced thousands of mixed-race children into orphanages. Decades later, they are still seeking justice

photographs by LAURA STEVENS and THOMAS FRETEUR



she says.



## The criminal abuse that King Leopold II of Belgium

notoriously visited upon the people of the Congo River Basin, beginning with his illicit appropriation in the 1880s of the vast territory he called the Congo

Free State, did not end after he ceded control of the colony to the Belgian Parliament in 1908. For many more decades, brutal apartheid existed in the Belgian Congo and adjacent colonies—Belgium also gained the territory known as Ruanda-Urundi, corresponding to the present-day republics of Rwanda and Burundi—and this forced segregation gave rise to an especially heinous policy that is only now coming fully into view.

Marriage between white and Black people was made impossible by colonial administrators. Children of mixed-race parentage were not officially recognized by the state, which depended upon clear hierarchies and distinctions of race. While those who had been acknowledged by their European fathers or mothers were allowed to live with their families, the disavowed children were registered as members of the “civilized native population,” placing them under the guardianship of the state. The children were taken young, in some cases as soon as they could go to the bathroom on their own. African parents who refused to release their toddlers were threatened with reprisals, including jail time. Many of the abducted children would never see either parent again. Estimates vary, but the number of young people affected by this colonial policy, which officially ended in the 1960s, is certainly in the many thousands.

Monique Bitu Bingi remembers all too clearly the final time the tall white man showed up in her village. The year was 1953, and she was living with her mother, grandparents, aunts and uncles in a scattering of mud-and-thatch huts in the Kasai region of what was then the Belgian Congo. They had all seen the man before; he showed up periodically to check on the cotton plantings that each household was required to cultivate. On this occasion, he spoke with one of her uncles, and later on, back at her grandparents’ hut, the 4-year-old no-

Right, Monique Bitu Bingi. She was taken from her family as a girl and placed with nuns at the Katende mission, below. The telegram announces the arrival of more children at the mission.



ticed that a grim mood had descended over the grown-ups. She lay down to sleep beside her grandmother, her mother having disappeared from the compound.

The next thing Bitu Bingi remembers is waking by a large river. Her uncle helped her into a long, narrow canoe. After she and her grandmother, aunt and uncle disembarked on the opposite shore, the four of them walked for three days, the adults taking turns carrying little Monique. At night, they bedded down in huts that villagers had built for storing cotton. Eventually they came to a hospital, where the tall Belgian stood waiting by his truck. Some men lifted a cot holding a lifeless child into the back of it, and



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“We were told we were ‘the children of sin.’ The sisters, the population, everyone called us that.”

emies. (This particular war ritual had deep roots in the region: Under King Leopold, state agents were required to cut the right hands from the Congolese they had murdered, as proof of both the number dead and that the king’s precious bullets had not gone to waste.) They forced the girls to watch as they dumped the bloody trophies—sometimes as many as 50 or 60

of them—into a nearby ditch. Enemies captured alive would be marched down to the river and shot, their corpses left to float downstream. “We saw many, many dead bodies,” said Bitu Bingi. Eventually, police officers arrived, having been sent to protect the children. At night they would order the girls to lie in the dirt and spread their legs. “We’ll show you how babies are made,” they would say, penetrating the prepubescent girls with long candles.

When a local administrator learned that the girls were being abused, he divided them among some families nearby. Most were reasonably well taken care of, but there were some reports of sexual assault by guardians during those months after Katende.

In mid-1961, Bitu Bingi managed to hitch a ride back to Katende with a truck full of soldiers hopped up for war. They settled her into the flatbed among their machetes, spears and arrows. At the mission, she ran around grabbing sugar, dried fish and salt—whatever she could get her hands on—then stopped in to check on the abandoned orphans. “I went to look for them,” she said. She found graves. “This one was dead and this one was dead. Three-quarters of them were dead.” A local woman came to look after the babies who’d survived. A few days later, Bitu Bingi flagged the soldiers down for a ride back and was hoisted onto a flatbed now pulsing with the grisly aftermath of their fight. Between the disembodied arms and legs and the bloody hands, she said, “I didn’t know where to look.”

IT WAS IN THE YEARS after World War I that Belgium gained control of the territory known as Ruanda-Urundi, which became the independent countries of Rwanda and Burundi in 1962. There, the métis children, as wards of the state, were marched onto airplanes and flown to Belgium for placement with foster families or in orphanages.

From the beginning of its time in the region, the colonial power favored members of the Tutsi tribe over those of the more numerous Hutus. The Europeans’ preference for Tutsi women was evident in the métis population, the majority of which tended to be of Tutsi ancestry. In large part because of the Belgians’ discrimination, tribal tensions in the region had been rising since the mid-1950s, with Tutsis already beginning to be murdered. On the eve of independence, the state agreed to “evacuate” the children on grounds of escalating violence in the region.

Jacqui Goegebeur was just 5 months old when her Belgian father died of a heart attack. (She has a single photo of him,



placed biracial people, known as métis, have mementos from their previous lives, but Goegebeur has a picture of her father with a baby zebra.



## "I knew I couldn't sit down with the child in front of me and tell them how much pain I have."

holding a zebra.) Colonial officials moved Goegebeur's 6-year-old brother to one mission and sent her and her 5-year-old sister, Frédérique, to a place that local residents called the White Sisters, run by Catholic nuns in an area called Save, in southern Rwanda. Three years later, in 1959, the girls were flown to Belgium, where Goegebeur was placed with a family of three in the coastal town of Blankenberge, in the Dutch-speaking part of the country. Frédérique grew up with a family 80 miles away. According to Goegebeur, the idea was that she would serve as playmate to the couple's 12-year-old daughter. "Only she'd never asked for a sister." When the two would go out together, her foster sister would be careful to walk several yards ahead.

One night, when Goegebeur was 9, her 18-year-old foster sister came bounding into her room to tell her all about how she'd fallen in love. "But you will never get that," the older girl said, "because you are Black." That was the first time, Goegebeur said, "that I was aware there was a problem with me." (For her part, Goegebeur's foster sister does not recollect their past in the same way: "About our shared history, I don't recognize Jacqui's story at all.")

The now-67-year-old, who recounted her story over cappuccinos in a Brussels coffee shop, would

◀ Jacqui Goegebeur. Led to believe her mother did not want her, she later learned the woman had made multiple attempts to hide her and her siblings from Belgian officials.

### BYLINES

Writer **Jocelyn C. Zuckerman** is the author of *Planet Palm: How Palm Oil Ended Up in Everything—and Endangered the World*.

**Laura Stevens** has an upcoming exhibition at Galerie Miranda in Paris, France.

**Thomas Freteur** recently curated an exhibition on the impact of communitarian radios in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

later learn that her birth father had left money for her upbringing and education, but her foster family dispersed only meager amounts, telling Goegebeur, for example, that she didn't really need to eat meat and offering her sheets to rip up when she was menstruating. Her foster sister, meanwhile, would be provided with store-

bought tampons. One of the nuns at Goegebeur's Catholic high school told her that she was lucky she wasn't a pig, "because when pigs mix race, the babies are born with several colors."

At the age of 18, having finally taken the birth certificate and other files that she'd discovered as an 11-year-old rifling through her foster father's office, Goegebeur left the family for good, matriculating at a university in Ghent. "You see a birth certificate," she said, "you see letters from nuns, but you don't understand. Really understanding, that is something very new for us."

**PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY OTHER** imperial power, Belgium has resisted reckoning with its colonial past. For generations, its citizens seem to have alternated between maintaining a stony silence and outright glorifying life in the former colonies. A bronze statue of a horse-mounted Leopold still occupies a place of pride in central Brussels, and one of the city's main routes, the boulevard Général Jacques, commemorates a man who, when confronted with rebelling Congolese laborers, vowed "absolute submission" or "complete extermination." A 2022 survey conducted by the University of Antwerp and

Belgium's AfricaMuseum found that out of 12 questions asked about the country's imperialism, respondents, who were representative of the national population, could answer an average of just four correctly. Only 70 percent knew which king had taken possession of the Congo as a private state, and barely any could name the three African nations formerly under Belgian rule.

The year 2008 marked a century since the Belgian state took direct control over Leopold's African holdings, and Goegebeur, feeling offended by the media barrage celebrating "that big, beautiful period" of colonialism, decided she needed to do something. She would go on to co-found two organizations, miXed2010 and the Métis of Belgium Association, both dedicated to helping fellow métis find community, raise awareness about their plight and lobby the government to address their ongoing challenges. Because colonial agents had routinely changed the names of métis toddlers and falsified documents so the children would be unable to track down their European fathers, many métis continue to lack birth certificates and have been unable to gain Belgian citizenship.

The logistical nightmares only compound a lifelong sense of rootlessness and alienation. When Goegebeur was 21, she flew back to Rwanda in hopes of finding her mother. Disembarking in Kigali, surrounded by Black people, she remembers feeling disoriented and profoundly lonely. "I was used to white people," she said.

Everyone that Goegebeur had told about her plans to return to Africa had warned her. "Be careful," they said. Sure enough, she said, when she arrived in the village where her mom was living, "All the clichés they said would happen, happened. She told me lies. She said, 'I'm so lonely.' And those who translated said, 'Oh, she's not lonely. She has a husband there.' And then she asked for money."

Goegebeur's sister, Frédérique, hadn't wanted Jacqui to go in the first place. The older girl had been 5 when the two were taken away by the gendarmerie, and Frédérique's memory was of a mother standing there motionless, with a blank expression on her face. She hadn't even cried. "Her idea was that she was a cold woman," said Goegebeur. "We were taught to think about our mothers as uncivilized, careless people."

In 2014, after retrieving her sister's files from the government archives in Flanders (Frédérique died of cancer two years later), Goegebeur learned that their mother had twice hidden her daughters from the police and that they were taken from her only on the third attempt. However, the clarity came too



## The Belgian Catholic Church issued a statement in 2017 apologizing for the role it played in the abductions.

late. Her mom and aunts had all been murdered in the 1994 genocide—which took the lives of several hundred thousand Tutsis over the course of three months. She'd learned of her mother's death previously from fellow métisses.

Bitu Bingi, who welcomed me into her house in a quiet town on the Flemish-speaking side of Belgium, once returned to her birth village, and she briefly reunited with her mother, who explained that she'd run off that night in 1953 because she couldn't bear to see her baby girl taken away. Still, having lived apart for two decades, the feelings the two once had for each other never returned. "This was 'a child of sin,'" Bitu Bingi's youngest daughter, Monique Fernandes, offered as an explanation. "They had already begun to break the love between the mother and the child."

In the intervening years, Bitu Bingi's mother had married a Congolese man and given birth to other children. "You have to understand," Bitu Bingi said, "when you grow up without someone . . ." She trailed off.

Even today, Jacqui Goegebeur can't talk about her past with her two adult daughters. "That's one of the reasons I started doing this work," she said, "because I knew I couldn't sit down with the child in front of me and tell them how much pain I have."

**BELGIUM, FINALLY**, has begun to confront the reality of its imperial past. In 2018, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, located in a Brussels suburb called Tervuren, reopened as the AfricaMuseum after a five-year overhaul aimed at undoing its longtime reputation as a bastion of colonial propaganda. Also that year, the country renamed a square in the capital city after Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who was assassinated by political opponents (with the complicity of the Belgian state) in 1961. And, thanks in large part to lobbying by Goegebeur and others, the métis question has finally become the subject of a national discussion.

In March 2018, Belgium's Chamber of Representatives unanimously passed something called the Métis Resolution, mandating that the govern-

ment find administrative solutions to the problems that continue to result from "the segregation of métis who were victims under the Belgian colonial administration."

A team of researchers has begun to sift through the thousands of documents hurriedly transported out of the Belgian Congo at independence and Ruanda-Urundi shortly thereafter; likewise, it is reviewing documents kept by the Association for the Protection of Mulâtres, the main organization responsible in the 1950s and '60s for placing mixed-race children with Belgian families. The materials are being entered into a database, which will allow researchers to assist survivors looking to learn about their identities and reconstruct their histories.

The researchers also have created a virtual exhibition documenting stories of the métis. The resolution, for which the state has already earmarked €1.9 million, also mandates that the government undertake a comprehensive study of the métis, exploring the role played by Belgian authorities at the political, administrative, legal and religious levels. "It's really extraordinary that they adopted these resolutions that take these very strong engagements," said Del-

phine Lauwers, the archivist overseeing the project. "This initiative is not just legal or social or historic. It's really a very vast question that traverses the entire period—all aspects of colonial life."

Even given the considerable resources devoted to the project, said Lauwers, who has a PhD in history and has done research on the Rwandan genocide tribunals, it is proving exceptionally complex. Not only are there thousands of victims involved, but some of the files—particularly those linked to the ministries of defense and foreign affairs (the successor to the colonial administration)—remain inaccessible because of legal obstacles. And though the Belgian Catholic Church issued a statement in 2017 apologizing for the role it played in the abductions and asking Catholic institutions in Belgium, Africa and Rome to make available all documents that might help survivors find their ancestry, they are technically private and logistically difficult to access.

"I'VE HAD THIS BAG for 40 years," Bitu Bingi said, setting down a black-and-gold-striped canvas carry-all on her dining room table. The soft-spoken mother of seven moved to this quaint village in 1981, after the death of her Congolese husband. "I wanted my children to be people of the world," she said. A few years later, she traveled back to the mission in Katende and asked the mother superior, now a Congolese woman, for access to the school's old files.



▲ Simone Ngalula. She was separated from her brothers at 3, when a grandfather left her at Katende. Reunited, she visits her siblings regularly.

➤ In the early 1960s, when mixed-race children lived at Katende, the United Nations sent troops to the Congo to try to stabilize the country at war.

pulled out a *feuille de route*, or travel order, along with a road-map with instructions on how to get to Katende. Among the documents Bitu Bingi collected was a 1953 telegram informing the nuns that an agent would be accompanying her friend Ngalula and her two brothers to the school. “*L’enfant mulâtre VANDENBROECK Simone*,” it reads, “*née le 13.4.1950*.” Ngalula hadn’t known her father’s last name until Bitu Bingi returned from Congo with the files. “They didn’t want to give me the name Vandembroeck,” Ngalula said sadly.

“That’s me,” Bitu Bingi said, pointing to an impish-looking child in a group photograph. “She’s the one who punished me,” she went on, singling out a nun and describing how once, after climbing a tree at the age of 8 or 9 to pick oranges, Bitu Bingi had been ordered to harvest habanero chiles every morning for a week. Repeatedly thrusting her throbbing fingers in and out of a bucket of water had done nothing to relieve the excruciating burning sensation that resulted.

The bag also held some newer documents. Bitu Bingi pulled out a correspondence with Queen Fabiola from the year that she arrived in Belgium. “I was really sure my queen was going to help me, because I had never asked her for anything,” she said.

Tavares Mujinga, who moved to Belgium from Congo in 1988 after the death of her mixed-race husband, also said that she’d written to the queen. “I am here in Belgium,” the letter read, “my husband is dead. I have four children. I could use a little help.” Both women received replies, on thick letterhead featuring a pink embossed crown, that assured them the queen

## “If Belgium doesn’t face this story, the trauma will be passed down from generation to generation.”

had read their letters. She referred them to the Public Centers for Social Assistance, Belgium’s welfare administration.

It wasn’t thanks to the government, but Bitu Bingi has enjoyed one victory along the way. In early 2014, one of her five sons, Serge, took the train to his mother’s house from his home in Paris to introduce her to his new baby. He’d been poking around online, he told her during the visit, and had found someone with the same name as her dad, Dumont. Fernandes contacted the man through the genealogy site where Serge found him and sent him a note. A week went by, and she was disappointed to see that he hadn’t replied, but she did notice an Argentine flag on his profile. With the help of Google Translate, she re-sent her message, this time in Spanish. “I think my mother is your half-sister,” she wrote.

Two weeks later, in March 2014, Bitu Bingi boarded a plane in Brussels with Fernandes, Serge and one of her other sons. Stepping into the arrivals lounge in Chaco, Argentina, the four were greeted by dozens of cheering, never-before-met relatives, many of them blond and blue-eyed. “Welcome!” read

their hand-lettered signs and banners. “Family of the World!” Bitu Bingi and Dumont ran immediately to each other and stood in a tight embrace, tears streaming down their cheeks.

“The Belgian state had told her that her father didn’t care,” said Fernandes, “that he didn’t want anything to do with her.” In fact, her dad, whose first wife, an Argentine, had died in a plane crash after giving birth to three children, had told his kids to one day look for their half-sister.

“Now, she’s found these ten brothers and sisters and their children and their grandchildren,” said Fernandes, “a whole family, at the age of 65.”

■

**TAVARES MUJINGA, NGALULA** and another Katende alumna, Marie-José Loshi, were sharing one of their regular meals together in 2018 (they’re the closest of friends) and debating whether the government’s *métis* initiative was likely to have any impact on their lives. Bitu Bingi still tenses up every time a truck rumbles past her house. “The nightmares never end,” she said. “That the military trucks are coming, that we are running away. The body parts, the babies, all of that. I would like to ask the state, ‘How can I keep all of that in my head for all these years?’”

Again it was Fernandes who took the initiative, reaching out to Brussels-based lawyer Michèle Hirsch, who worked with victims of rape and other violent crimes. At first, Hirsch declined a meeting with the women, explaining that she only deals with criminal law. “Yes,” Fernandes told her. “That’s exactly what we need.” A few weeks later, five alumnae of Katende rang the buzzer at the offices

of Hirsch & Vanhaelst, on a leafy street in Brussels’ upscale Louise neighborhood. They were Bitu Bingi, Tavares Mujinga, Ngalula, Loshi and Noëlle Verbeken. One by one, the women, gathered around a conference table, recounted the full stories of their girlhoods, most of them for the very first time.

“They hadn’t even told their children,” Hirsch said. “That is part of the trauma. We saw that with the Holocaust and with the genocide in Rwanda. I met women; they didn’t talk of their own experiences of being raped, but they told the stories of their husbands, their sons, who had been murdered.

“We didn’t understand immediately,” she went on. “We had never heard about this.” Hirsch, who has a quiet ferocity and a penchant for chunky jewelry, began digging into the state archives, engaging academic experts and, with her colleagues, creating dossiers for the five women. “These documents are extraordinary,” she said. “They prove that the Belgian state, during colonization, put in place a system to take very young



▲ Marie-José Loshi. She’s a plaintiff in a lawsuit accusing the Belgian government of crimes against humanity for forcibly removing children from their families in the Congo River Basin.

children, between 2 and 4 years old, from their mothers, all of them *métisses*, to put them under the power of the state, and place them by force in religious institutions in a manner to preserve the supremacy of whites. This was not an orphan,” she continued. “This was not an abandoned child. The church sequestered these children. All of that was dressed up in decrees and rules.”

Because none of the individuals responsible for the system remain alive today, Hirsch and her clients took their case to the state, bringing civil suit against the government. They requested reparations of a

mere €50,000 per person and the appointment of an expert to assess the mental, physical and financial hardships the women have suffered. They settled on the small sum because losing the case would mean paying a portion of the state’s legal fees.

The Catholic Church is not part of the women’s lawsuit, but that doesn’t mean it bears no responsibility for the atrocities. “Without the church, there would have been no way to put the system in place,” said Hirsch. “The state delegated the power to the church, with the understanding that the church would not let the kids go back to their families. . . . In order to get paid, the church needed the documents saying, ‘We entrust this child to you.’”

Hirsch emphasizes that the oldest plaintiff in the suit, Tavares Mujinga, arrived at Katende in 1948. That was three years after the Allies in World War II had established the concept of a crime against humanity, defining it as “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war.” They also referred to persecutions “on political, racial or religious grounds.”

Hirsch could imagine the sort of arguments she and her clients would hear, including equivocation with Leopold’s atrocities. “Everyone is going to tell us, ‘Yes, and they cut their hands off, and they did this and that in these other countries. . . .’ No! Our clients are living, and when they were children, after 1948, they took these measures in Belgian territory. Since when,” she continued, “when one commits a crime, do they

say, ‘*Excusez-moi*’? That’s valuable to whom? A state must take responsibility.”

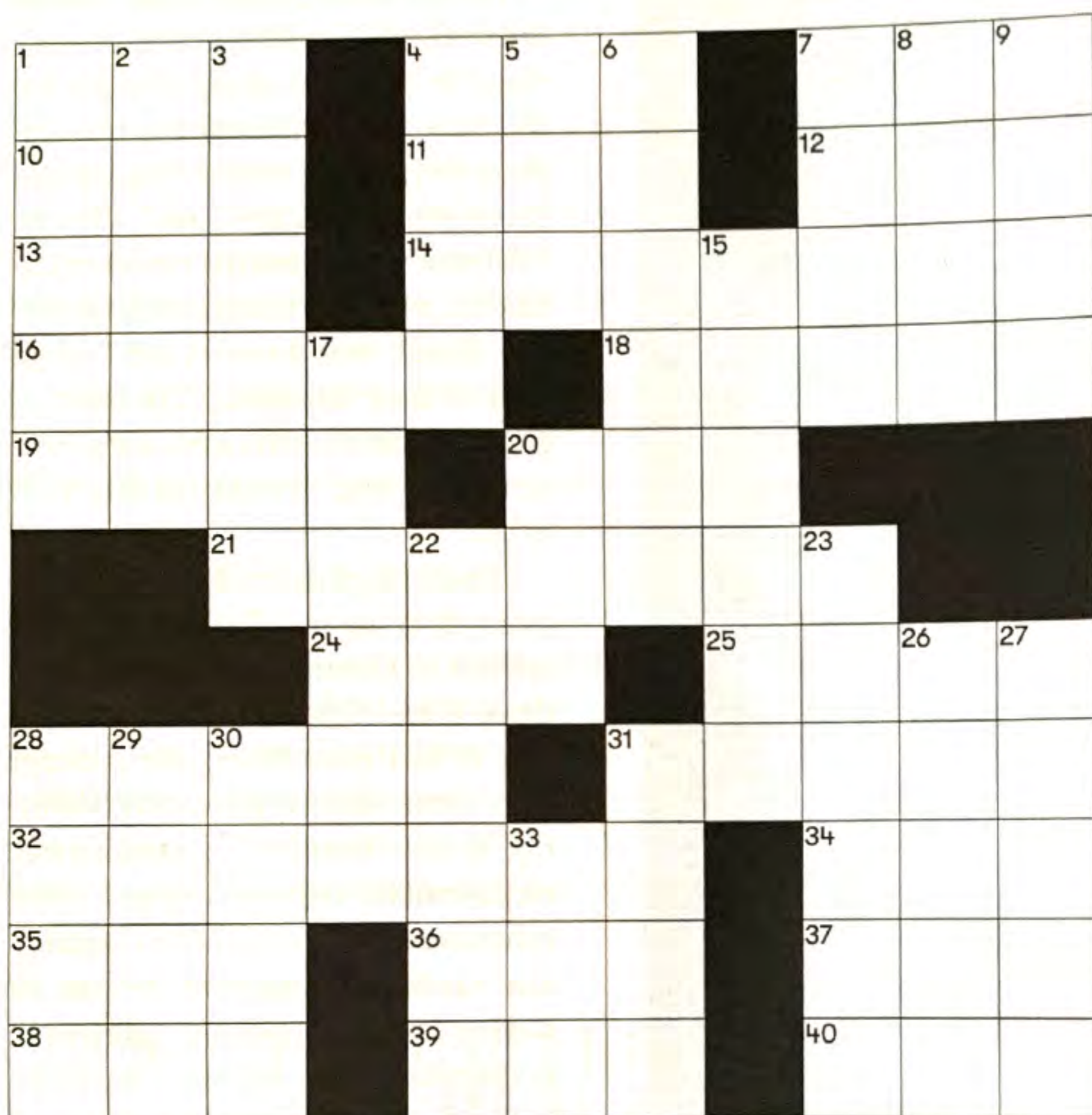
■

**ON A CHILLY AFTERNOON** in October 2021, Goegebeur and a few hundred others crammed into a nondescript courtroom in downtown Brussels to lend support to the five *métisse* plaintiffs. During the hearing, which lasted only a few hours and did not include live testimony, Hirsch argued that her clients had been “abducted, abused, ignored and expelled from the world. They are living proof of an unconfessed state crime,

# Don't Be Puzzled

YOU CAN FIND 11 ANSWERS IN THESE PAGES

By Sam Ezersky



## Across

- 1 More, in Mexico
- 4 Letters before *Constitution*
- 7 Selfie, e.g.
- 10 "Able was I \_\_\_ I saw Elba" (famous palindrome)
- 11 Informal instant
- 12 Critical hospital locale
- 13 Job for a AAA vehicle
- 14 Workers at Westminster Abbey
- 16 "Wait, did \_\_\_ something?"
- 18 Gets together with
- 19 Yemen's capital, as it's sometimes spelled
- 20 Well-suited
- 21 One of many that cover 10 percent of earth's land
- 24 "Live" tree in the hull of Old Ironsides
- 25 Animals with methanogens living in one of their four stomach compartments
- 28 Retort to "Are so!"
- 31 "Quit \_\_\_!" ("Enough already!")
- 32 Purported quality of Frank Johnson's jazz
- 34 Dr. of rap music
- 35 Do some lawn work
- 36 Square on a phone screen
- 37 Quirky

- 38 Suffix with differ
- 39 What "5" might mean
- 40 December 31, for short

## Down

- 1 People at the heart of a campaign to right a wrong in Belgium's history
- 2 Pleasant smell
- 3 Area of expertise for Leah Maguire
- 4 Some computer ports
- 5 "Get it?"
- 6 Garlicky shrimp dish
- 7 \_\_\_ burn, first step for setting a controlled fire
- 8 Rapper-turned-actor on "Law & Order: SVU"
- 9 Say "\$%&#!," say
- 17 Western watering hole
- 20 Cutesy comics cry
- 22 Many a minor-league ball club
- 23 Amazon explorer alongside Roosevelt in the 1910s
- 26 Overly verbose
- 27 Person from Stockholm
- 28 Phrase said with a sigh
- 29 New \_\_\_, homestead in Lucy Maud Montgomery's writing
- 30 Food package abbr.
- 31 Kids' road trip game
- 33 Health resort spot

See the solution on Page 124.

and soon there will be no one left to testify." The government's lawyer acknowledged that the policies in question had been racist and shameful. But he maintained that the policies hadn't been seen as violating fundamental rights at the time they were put in place. Besides, he said, if the state were to make payouts to these women, how many of the other approximately 4,000 métis in Belgium would file lawsuits?

In his decision, delivered two months later, the judge sided with the state. The public response, in keeping with the larger societal trend toward denial about the colonial past, was muted. "A part of Belgian society, mostly, but not exclusively, the older generations, still seems somewhat hesitant at the idea of recognizing too many wrongs, and some of our politicians still insist on highlighting 'the good sides of colonization,'" Lauwers, the archivist, explained. After two years of interviews and hearings, a parliamentary commission set up in 2020 was unable to persuade the Belgian Chamber of Representatives to issue even an apology.

Hirsch and her clients have appealed the ruling and have been given a deadline of May 2023 to submit final arguments. (Goegebeur, for her part, has been working with the Switzerland-based organization Justice Initiative, which focuses on child abuse. She believes that the métis may have a sound legal case in the European Union, predicated on the systematic discrimination and violation of the rights of a child.)

Hirsch points to Canada and Australia, both of which publicly reckoned with discriminatory policies involving Indigenous and "half-caste" children in 2021. In the former case, several lawsuits have led to settlements in the billions of dollars for the harm done to Indigenous people through a system of mandatory residential schools that a national commission called "cultural genocide." Australia's government agreed to pay \$280 million to survivors who were removed from their families in federally controlled areas of the country. The United States recently acknowledged its role in an assimilation campaign that required Native American families to send their children to government-run boarding schools during the turn of the 20th century. Hirsch believes Belgium will eventually acknowledge its past crimes and enact reparations for all métis taken from their families. In the meantime, she is adamant that her clients will prevail.

"If Belgium doesn't face this story," Bitu Bingi said, "the trauma will be passed down from generation to generation. It did it. It must pay." ♦