

A Case Of Murder Or Anti-Semitism?

By Edwin Eytan

BESANCON, France (JTA) — In this provincial city of 100,000, tucked away in the Jura mountains 400 kilometers southeast of Paris, nine out of 10 of the inhabitants had never heard of William Nakash, a 25-year-old French Jew of North African origin, of Avraham Sharir, the Justice Minister of Israel, or of the fierce legal battle that erupted when Sharir refused last week to extradite Nakash to France for the crime of murder.

Now, however, the case is front-page news. The local daily, "Le Republicain De L'est," devoted a full page to it and the police, the city fathers and the townsfolk, including the Jewish community, are angered by the obloquy heaped on Besancon and its citizens by Nakash's defenders.

Nakash, known to his friends as "Vivi," was convicted in absentia by a French court for the murder, with two accomplices, of 20-year-old Abdelali Hakkar, an Algerian Arab, on the night of February 24, 1983.

He was given a life sentence, a formality under French law when a defendant flees the country. The law provides for automatic re-trial when the fugitive is apprehended.

Nakash fled to Israel under an assumed name. Only after he was arrested there for attempted robbery did his identity become known and France requested extradition. Suddenly, he was surrounded by supporters. Nakash, who claims to be a Baal Tshuva, has been passionately defended by Orthodox Jews and rightwing

nationalist elements.

They have depicted him as a hero who killed an Arab in self-defense, a "nationalistic" act forced on him by unbearable harassment by Jew-hating Arabs, abetted by a climate of rampant anti-Semitism in Besancon.

Sorting Out The Facts

Was that true? This reporter visited Besancon to find out what happened on the night of the murder, the background and motivation for the crime, and the political climate here. And, is Besancon indeed known for its anti-Semitism or racist feelings?

The court minutes of the trial of a 24-year-old Algerian, Hassen Hamoudi, one of Nakash's accomplices, provided some answers. In May 1984, Hamoudi was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment. The second accomplice, Charlie Mimi, a 23-year-old youth of mixed race, was arrested in Miami, Florida, on April 15, 1985 and will go on trial here January 16.

The charge sheets against the three suspects, interviews and on-and-off-the-record conversations with police officials, prosecuting attorneys, local reporters and some of the city's 500 Jews yielded more information.

The police inspector who was in charge of the case, a veteran of the Paris Serious Crimes Squad, confessed to be "deeply surprised" by the agitation and political turmoil.

"Without a shadow of a doubt," he told this reporter, the murder was "a straightforward set-

ting of accounts which got out of hand. Vivi, a small-time hoodlum who tried to play the tough guy, got carried away... There was no racket, no gang warfare. Politics? Anti-Semitism? You must be out of your mind to imagine something like this. Atoush (the victim's nickname) would probably not have found Israel on a map and cared as much about politics as about last winter's snow."

'Revolted' By Insinuation Of Anti-Semitism

Jacques Lorach, president of the Besancon branch of LICRA, the International League Against Anti-Semitism, told this reporter he was "revolted" by insinuations that Besancon might be a hotbed of anti-Semitism.

Lorach, a 72-year-old lawyer, served as Deputy Mayor for 25 years. "Never in all my life, and certainly not in my political career, have I heard or been told about any anti-Semitic remark," he said. "Not even my bitterest political opponents, including the extreme right, have ever tried to use this weapon (anti-Semitism) against me."

Lorach's wife, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen who lost most of her family at Auschwitz, founded a local museum in honor of French Jewish deportees in the Citadel which overlooks the city. It is one of the largest and most impressive memorials to the Holocaust outside the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

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