‘Justice Has Been Done’: Antisemitic Murderer of Holocaust Survivor Mireille Knoll Sentenced to Life Imprisonment by French Court

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The murder trial that compelled France to confront the violent antisemitism in its midst came to a dramatic close on Wednesday, as a court in Paris sentenced one of the two men accused of the brutal killing of Mireille Knoll, an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor who suffered from Parkinson’s Disease, to life imprisonment.

Following almost ten hours of deliberation by the jury, 32-year-old Yacine Mihoub, a former neighbor of Knoll’s, was found guilty of murder aggravated by antisemitic hatred. The terms of Mihoub’s life sentence require that he serve a minimum of 22 years.

The second accused man, Alex Carrimbacus, Mihoub’s 25-year-old associate, was acquitted on the murder charge but found guilty of aggravated theft. The court sentenced him to a 15-year prison term.

Mihoub’s mother, Zoulikha Khellaf, separately received a three year prison sentence, with two years suspended, for having cleaned the knife used in the murder of Knoll — who was stabbed eleven times by Mihoub before her body was set on fire. Firefighters who arrived at her apartment in a Paris public housing project shortly after her murder on March 23, 2018 discovered her badly burned remains sprawled on the floor.

Throughout the trial, which began on Oct. 26, lawyers for the Knoll family stressed the antisemitic element behind the killing. A police investigation following Knoll’s death established that Mihoub was a regular visitor to Islamist and antisemitic websites, and was already known to the authorities for having praised the Kouachi brothers, Islamist terrorists who carried out the deadly attack against the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Jan. 2015.

A grandmother who lived alone in an apartment in the 11th arrondissement of Paris, Knoll had known Mihoub, who lived with his family in the same building, since his childhood. A petty criminal and alcoholic with previous convictions for drug dealing and violence, Mihoub had received his most recent prison sentence for a sexually assaulting a minor in Mireille Knoll’s apartment — the 11-year-old daughter of her caregiver, who gave evidence against Mihoub at the trial on Monday.

Following that assault, Mihoub had been banned from visiting the building where Knoll lived, but continued to do so. According to his testimony to the court, Mihoub had been visiting Knoll in the hours before her murder, drinking and having what he described as a “good time.” He called Carrimbacus, a drug addict whom he befriended while in prison, and invited him to join them at Knoll’s apartment, where Mihoub had already consumed nearly an entire bottle of port.

The accounts of the two accused men as to what then transpired in Knoll’s apartment diverged sharply at this point. Mihoub tried to blame the killing on Carrimbacus, claiming that he had left his friend alone with Knoll for five minutes, during which time she was stabbed repeatedly and then robbed. But according to Carrimbacus, it was Mihoub who murdered Knoll during an argument in which he angrily insisted that Jews “have financial means and a good situation,” shouting the words “Allahu Akhbar” (“God is great’) as he plunged the knife into his victim.

Prosecuting lawyers had argued throughout the trial that it was Mihoub who bore “sole responsibility for the particularly savage killing of Mrs. Knoll,” an act aggravated by his antisemitic prejudices. During his testimony, Mihoub did little to undermine this depiction. “I think if it had been a ‘Geraldine’ or a ‘Fatima,’ there wouldn’t have been so much noise,” he responded when questioned about antisemitism as a motive for the killing. On another occasion, he challenged the facts of the Holocaust, declaring, “One or two million dead, we don’t know. We can’t prove it. We weren’t there, neither you nor me. ”

The court also heard how soon after the killing, Mihoub and Carrimbacus had visited a bar where, in the earshot of witnesses, Mihoub praised Amedy Coulibaly, the Islamist gunman who murdered four Jews at a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris in Jan. 2015, as a “good guy.” When this remark was raised at the trial, Mihoub doubled down, answering: “We are not born as terrorists. He was probably a good person before.”

In the wake of Wednesday’s verdict, Daniel and Alain Knoll — Mireille Knoll’s two sons — declared themselves “relieved” by the jury’s decision.

Earlier on Wednesday, the brothers announced that they had written to France’s education minister urging that March 23 — the day of their mother’s death — be named officially as “Mireille Knoll Day.” The letter pointed out that such a commemorative day would also be an opportunity to honor other French victims of political and religious extremism, such as Father Jacques Hamel, a Catholic priest murdered by two Islamists while in his church in July 2016; Lt. Col Arnaud Beltrame, a police officer murdered during a terrorist hostage seizure just one day after Knoll’s killing in March 2018; and Samuel Paty, a Paris secondary school teacher who was decapitated by an Islamist assailant in Oct. 2020.

The hefty sentences handed down in the case of the Knoll murder contrasted acutely with the shock decision of France’s highest court last April to excuse another accused antisemitic murderer from a criminal trial.

The Court of Cassation decided that Kobili Traore — accused of killing 65-year-old Sarah Halimi during an antisemitic assault in her Paris apartment in April 2017 — could not be held as criminally responsible because of his heavy intake of cannabis in the hours before the murder. That decision led France’s main Jewish communal body, Crif, to state that “now in our country, we can torture and kill Jews with impunity.”

Jewish groups reacted positively to the sentencing of Mihoub and Carrimbacus. France’s Jewish student organization, the UEJF, said on Twitter that “the antisemitic murderer of Mireille Knoll was sentenced to life imprisonment,” adding that “in France, when you kill a Jewish grandmother, justice sentences her murderer to life.”

The American Jewish Committee tweeted that “nothing can bring [Mireille Knoll] back, but at the very least justice has been served. Our thoughts are with her family today.”

Gilles-William Goldnadel, the leading lawyer for the Knoll family, reflected on Twitter that “justice has been done and done well.”

“Yacine, the murderer with the knife, the antisemite, the admirer of Coulibaly, who had a map of Algeria [tattooed] on his chest but referred to France as ‘that f\*\*\*\*\*\*g country,’ was sentenced to the maximum penalty,” Goldnadel continued. “Tonight, I think of Mireille Knoll.”