French Jew killed by tram likely a target of antisemitic attack, family says

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/french-jew-killed-by-tram-likely-a-target-of-antisemitic-attack-family-says/>

Relatives of Jeremy Cohen, a 31-year-old French Jew who died two months ago after being hit by a tram in the town of Bobigny, near Paris, said Monday that his death was not an accident, but the result of an antisemitic attack.

Initially, his death was reported as a “pedestrian being run over,” but video footage released by Cohen’s family on Monday showed the moments leading to his death and indicated that the incident could have been triggered by an assault.

In the video, Cohen is seen being attacked by several members of a large group before running away from the crowd and being hit by an incoming tram.

He was evacuated to a nearby hospital in critical condition, where he died after succumbing to his wounds.

An observant Jew, Cohen died while wearing his kippah. His family claimed that he was targeted by the gang seen in the video for this reason alone.

The new footage raises the plausible possibility that Cohen did not notice the incoming tram as he was trying to escape his assailants, which would mean his death was the result of the attack.

“Jeremy’s death is linked to an attack of which he was the victim — by a gang of young people immediately before being hit,” Gerald Cohen, his father, told Radio Shalom, a French-Jewish radio station.

A report by Channel 12 cited Cohen’s brother Rafael as saying that police were too quick to classify his brother’s death as a traffic accident.

“A few days after my brother died, we were told that the case was being looked at as a traffic accident rather than an attack before they even watched video footage from the train and other evidentiary material,” he said.

“We arrived at the scene and started talking to people. We handed out flyers and asked for information from people who had witnessed the accident, by mail as well,” he said. “Surprisingly, we got replies. At first, people were making speculations but we eventually got a testimony from a witness who had managed to catch the incident on camera — and that is what reignited the investigation,” he added.

Rafael called on law enforcement to “shed some light on the incident,” promising to provide police with any additional information the family might have.

The video surfaced days before France’s presidential election and on the anniversary of the high-profile murder of another French Jew, Sarah Halimi.  Two of the leading candidates, both right-wing, called attention to the case Monday, suggesting that French authorities were downplaying the possibility of antisemitic violence.

“Did he die because he was a Jew? Why is this case hushed up?” tweeted Jewish presidential candidate Éric Zemmour, who is now polling around fourth place despite multiple controversies.

“What was presented as an accident could be an anti-Semitic murder,” tweeted Marine Le Pen, head of the National Rally party, who is polling in second behind incumbent centrist Emmanuel Macron. “How to explain the silence on this affair and its motivations?”

French-Jewish lawmaker Meyer Habib also addressed the incident, calling it “heartbreaking” and said he has urged the French interior minister to address the incident immediately.

“The media had previously reported a ‘pedestrian being run over, but It seems like the real circumstances of Jeremy Cohen’s death, a 31-year-old Jew, were much more dramatic,” Habib said.

“The victim, who according to all witnesses, was wearing a kippah on his head, tried to escape, as the video clearly shows, from a group of bullies who attacked him. During his escape, he failed to see the tram coming toward him,” he added.

“The images are heart-breaking. I have turned to Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, who has promised me that the authorities are taking this case very seriously and that it is under the examination of the Justice Ministry,” he said.

“With only a week remaining until the first round of the presidential election, it seems like a new case of covert antisemitism is gaining momentum. In a sad coincidence, we mark today five years since the horrible [murder of Sarah Halimi](https://www.timesofisrael.com/french-parliamentary-report-on-sarah-halimi-murder-reopens-wounds-it-sought-to-heal/),” Habib noted.

Prosecutors in Bobigny announced Monday that they were investigating Cohen’s death and the circumstances surrounding it. They said they had opened the investigation in late March and were looking into the possibility that “intentional violence” had resulted in an unintended death.

But they did not mention the possibility of antisemitism contributing to Cohen’s death, calling to mind for some how Halimi’s 2017 murder was handled by French authorities.

On April 4 that year — the same date as Monday — Halimi was murdered in her apartment in Paris by a neighbor who shouted about Allah as he threw her to her death from the third story of her building. The killer, Kobili Traore, was not tried for the slaying because French judges accepted his defense, in which he said he had suffered a psychotic episode due to his consumption of marijuana. Last year’s ruling that ended the possibility of a trial set off protests in multiple countries.

Mainstream media had initially reported on the story as a deadly altercation between neighbors without mentioning its religious and antisemitic elements, which a court later acknowledged.

According to a January report by a French watchdog group, antisemitic incidents in France increased by 75% in 2021.