

Bikes are mine 'unless you have a police report'

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TORONTO — Wearing a wan, weary expression, the accused face of bicycle theft in Toronto let out a deep breath and stepped forward to give his name in a courtroom yesterday.

“Kenk, K-E-N-K,” he said, spelling out what most everyone in the room already knew: He was Igor Kenk, the long-time used-bicycle dealer facing a raft of charges in a sweeping probe that has so far uncovered nearly 2,500 stashed bicycles, many believed stolen.

Since the July 18 arrest of Mr. Kenk, 49, and Jean Laveau, 47, in the theft of one bike and an attempt to steal another, city dwellers have looked on with growing bewilderment at each new turn in the investigation, which began at Mr. Kenk's ramshackle bike shop on Queen Street West.

It has since led to eight rented buildings crammed with bikes, including the cluttered home Mr. Kenk shares with his wife, Jeanie Chung, an accomplished classical pianist. She too has been charged, in connection with drugs and a computer, allegedly stolen, found in the house.

With still more seizures expected, Mr. Kenk's scheduled bail hearing yesterday was postponed until Wednesday and he remains in custody.

As he appeared briefly in an Old City Hall courtroom, dozens of erstwhile bicycle owners lined up a few kilometres away to search for their long-lost wheels at a pair of warehouses, donated after police ran out of storage room.

Shocking as each new discovery sounds, the city had grown accustomed to, if not accepting of, Mr. Kenk as a fixture in the murky world of second-hand bicycle dealing, in which even a stolen bike can be sold legally as long as no one steps forward to claim it within a set time, and the dealer records its serial number and the name of whoever sold it to him.

Police say Mr. Kenk routinely satisfied those requirements and often returned bikes to rightful owners who had kept pertinent records and had reported them stolen. It was only when officers placed a “bait bike” across from his shop, and allegedly saw him instruct someone to steal it, that they moved in to arrest him, setting off the snowballing series of raids on bike-stuffed garages around the city's west end.

The fact that most people don't bother registering their bikes or reporting them stolen means they often land in licensed second-hand shops, where they are held for three weeks, then resold, stripped for parts or sold as scrap.

Mr. Kenk admitted as much in a series of audio interviews this month, recorded by documentarian Lewis Farrell, 23, of Toronto, just days before the shop owner's arrest, and obtained this week by The Globe and Mail. Mr. Farrell, who has had several bikes stolen, wanted to know where they end up, and his street-level inquiries led him to Mr. Kenk.

By turns profane and articulate, sarcastic and sympathetic, the Slovenian immigrant

presented himself as a former police officer who is now a lowly custodian of castoffs in a “fat, frivolous” city whose authorities are too lazy or corrupt to put an end to bike theft.

“We're living in the wealthiest, most ... affluent city on the planet,” Mr. Kenk told Mr. Farrell, “but this is going down because nobody does anything.” He said he has long advocated a licensing system for bikes, similar to that for cars, to stop the resale of stolen bikes, but “the business community does not want it” because it profits from selling new replacements.

So, he collects bicycles, some through salvaging, others through purchases from “providers,” some of whom he called “defective,” “emotional cripples” or “losers.”

As for the bikes he buys, he referred to them repeatedly as “pieces of shit,” though at other times personified them as having a “life force” and lamented people's willingness to discard them. “I've invested my blood, my money, my ... time into salvaging because it's immoral to throw out,” he said. “All of these bikes belong on the streets, not in the scrap.”

When Mr. Farrell raised the notion of off-site storage sheds, suggesting that Mr. Kenk was unlawfully hiding bikes from public view during the three-week cooling-off period, Mr. Kenk acknowledged he is “hoarding” bikes, but insisted all of them cool off in his shop as required.

“I just told you, I get the bike, I put it in the book, I throw it in the shop. They have three weeks of time as far as law goes; after that, it's my goodwill” that determines whether he will return a bike to an owner.

Mr. Kenk even admitted he alters the bikes he buys – changes the pedals, say, or the seat – as a kind of test to would-be claimants who come looking after the three weeks are up. “If you know which details I changed, you are welcome to my bike,” he said.

After Mr. Farrell suggested this was “dastardly” and “sneaky,” Mr. Kenk said: “You have no force, you have no right, you have nothing. ... I agree that it's ... wrong, but that's what it is. The bike is mine unless you have a police report.”

Gary Duke, owner of Duke's Cycle, a respected Queen Street fixture that his family ran for 94 years before a fire in February forced its relocation, recalled his first sighting of Mr. Kenk in the 1990s.

“He used to go through our garbage when we put it out in front of the store,” looking to salvage discarded parts, Mr. Duke said.

Since then, it has become a joke in the cycling community that when a bike is stolen, “your best bet is to go to Igor's within two to four hours,” he said.

Several bike-theft victims interviewed this week said they had done exactly that, with mixed success.

Regardless of the results, Mr. Duke said there's something wrong with a city that would, through lax regulations or weary indifference, sustain a situation that effectively legitimizes theft.

“There's so much complacency and life is so busy that you don't have time,” he said. “I think it's time for people in Toronto to stop turning a blind eye and start to get upset again.”