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# In a Cyclist-Friendly City, a Black Hole for Bikes

By [IAN AUSTEN](#)

TORONTO — What exactly was he planning to do with 2,865 bicycles?

That is just one of many questions the police and others have been puzzling over since the arrest last month of Igor Kenk, the owner of a used-bike shop here.

Mr. Kenk's legacy now fills a former police garage with a leaky roof. Organized by brand name and mostly resting on their handlebars, wheels pointed upward, are 2,396 of the bicycles that police say Mr. Kenk either stole or arranged to have stolen.

The jumbled collection of bicycles suggests that Mr. Kenk is the unofficial world champion of bicycle thieves. But as he awaits trial next month on 58 charges related to theft and drug possession, the biggest mysteries of all are Mr. Kenk's motives and his ultimate plan for the armada of steel, rubber and aluminum he amassed.

"He's easily the most hated man in Toronto," said Alex Jansen, a filmmaker who has been working on a documentary about Mr. Kenk for more than a year as part of a study of his rundown neighborhood's transition to hipsterdom. "But I just found that it's not as black and white as I originally thought."

Mr. Kenk was something of an informal social worker, Mr. Jansen explained, giving work to street people and outpatients from a nearby mental health institution. Of course, the police say some of that work involved stealing bicycles.

The arrest has provoked an outpouring of anger and publicity in a city renowned as one of the most bicycle-friendly places in the world. About 15,000 hopeful cyclists, some teary-eyed, have scoured the Kenk collection in search of their missing bicycles. But only 469 bicycles had been returned as of Thursday morning, when 17 more days of public viewings began.

The public reaction "was staggering," said Ruth White, the superintendent of 14 Division, the police unit that made the arrest. "I've never seen anything like it in 30 years."

Oddly enough, the police and many bicyclists were aware that Mr. Kenk's little shop, the Bicycle Clinic, appeared to be a black hole that consumed stolen bicycles. Bike theft victims regularly discovered their missing bicycles there, and were often able to recover them, either through vigorous argument or a payment of \$30 or \$40.

While he had been arrested once before, Mr. Kenk was acquitted because prosecutors could not prove that he knew that the bicycles in his possession had been stolen. After that, the police lost interest in pursuing him, and many in the neighborhood came to tolerate or avoid him and his shop.

"It had become the culture in his neighborhood to visit Igor to get your bike; people accepted it," Ms. White said.

The only reason Mr. Kenk was arrested was that bicycle thefts rose sharply in June, prompting 14 Division to start a general effort to trap the thieves by planting bicycles on the streets and waiting to see who took them.

As plainclothes officers watched on the afternoon of July 16, Mr. Kenk and another man passed the bait with no display of interest. But Mr. Kenk soon directed his companion, who has a history of mental illness, to cut the locks on two other bicycles — not ones planted by the police — and they then rode off on them.

“It was God’s way of saying, ‘It’s time to put a stop to this,’ ” said Inspector Bryce Evans of 14 Division.

When the police subsequently raided the Bicycle Clinic, the Fire Department at first blocked them from entering for safety reasons. The building was so crammed with bicycles and bike parts that a Fire Department rescue squad had to remove the upper-floor windows and lower the bicycles by rope.

That was just the beginning. An additional 200 bikes were seized in Mr. Kenk’s home. Ten landlords around the city reported that their garages had been rented by Mr. Kenk and were bulging with bicycles. As the police gathered the mounds of bikes, they also found cocaine, crack cocaine, about 15 pounds of marijuana and a stolen bronze sculpture of a centaur and a snake in battle.

Ms. White is among those baffled by it all, though she noted, “He made a lot of money off it, judging by where he was living.” While his shop was a shambles, Mr. Kenk shared a rented house in Yorkville, a fashionable and expensive neighborhood, with his partner, Jeanie Chung.

An accomplished pianist, Ms. Chung, who also faces charges for drugs and possession of stolen goods, turned herself in after returning from two performances in Banff, Alberta. (Ms. Chung’s lawyer did not respond to requests for comment.)

Since Mr. Kenk’s arrest, theories about his hoarding have proliferated. Because Mr. Kenk held a scrap metal dealer’s license, Inspector Evans speculates that he was playing the commodities markets, waiting for another spike in metals prices before melting down the bicycles.

In the past, Mr. Kenk has said that he was accumulating bicycles in preparation for a severe oil shortage. But in a somewhat disjointed interview in July for a radio documentary, portions of which were published by The Globe and Mail, a Toronto daily newspaper, Mr. Kenk portrayed himself as a crusader against theft and a protector of cast-off bicycles.

Mr. Kenk holds a passport from Slovenia and has claimed he was a police officer and a former K.G.B. agent. He has shed little light since his arrest. After one court session, he told reporters, “I’m a dead man.”

In a brief interview, Mr. Kenk’s lawyer, Lon G. Rose, declined to elaborate or offer any information about Mr. Kenk’s past, before saying: “The public reaction is a bit extreme and knee jerk.”

Mr. Jansen, the filmmaker, and others found Mr. Kenk to be a charismatic, if sometimes misguided, neighborhood philosopher. Mr. Jansen, who lives near the shop, said Mr. Kenk was a link to an era before street signs in the once-rundown area declared it to be the Art and Design District.

“You just get pulled completely in when you start talking to him,” Mr. Jansen said. “With the changing neighborhood, I knew that it would culminate in Igor being pushed out. I’m just shocked at the number of bikes and storage facilities, and the quantity of drugs is just ridiculous.”

There is no discernible pattern to the bicycles in the Kenk collection, which includes several children’s bicycle trailers and at least one toddler-size tricycle. But not everything is old, incomplete or damaged. Along two walls of the garage are dozens of packing cases filled with a product that is either appropriate or preposterous, given the circumstances: new bicycle locks.