

The Great Berkeley Chess Raid

Public chess tables, private property, crackdowns, and protesters

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY America's best chess club, but there's a leading contender for the country's most turbulent: the Telegraph Corner Chess Club of Berkeley, California.

The club has been raided by police, possibly marking a first in the annals of chess clubs. Its manager has been arrested, its chess sets confiscated. And, Berkeley being Berkeley, protesters have staged chess sit-ins, packing City Council chambers and playing chess during meetings at which the club's fate was debated.

"It's an effort to criminalize the chess club," said the club's battle-scarred director, Jesse Sheehan.

It's an effort to oust the club, that's for sure. Everything else is as complicated as a Mikhail Tal middlegame.

For starters, the club isn't a club at all in the usual sense. It's an arrangement of tables and chess sets on a small street-corner plaza on Telegraph Avenue, several blocks south of the University of California, Berkeley (UC) campus. Passersby strolling the vibrant street can play for free, especially since the tip jar was confiscated.

For another thing, both the UC and Telegraph Avenue were launchpads for the '60s counterculture, and that power-to-the-people ethos still reigns. City politics are robustly progressive, with radical elements that have earned the city the nickname Besekeley.

Many activists have come out in support of the chess club. In part, because the very

idea of raiding a chess club is preposterous. In part, because one of Berkeley's defining traits is the perennial conflict between people who prize "organic" community over big business and property rights.

And in part, because the club traces its provenance to People's Park. A 2.8-acre plot of land a half-block away from the Telegraph corner, People's Park is, to many Berkeley residents, hallowed ground. In the '60s it was the one of the birthplaces of historic counterculture revolution. Though it is owned by the UC, radicals long ago declared it a public space, a memorial to the anti-war protests, riots, and even a fatal police shooting that occurred there.

"It all goes back to what's happening in People's Park," said Sheehan, who first set up his chess tables there and moved only when homeless encampments, drugs, and crime made the park inhospitable.

But he brought with him the Berkeleyite belief that certain things by the people, and for the people, are good for the people, and good for a city — or, at least, better than whatever profit-driven corporations do.

Sheehan said people from all walks of life come to play at his club. "You see social barriers just falling away in magic ways."

In fact, this unifying effect is exactly what chess's international governing body, FIDE, claims the game, with its global appeal, has going for it. Its motto, "Gens Una Sumus," translates to "We are one family."

Telegraph chess players agree. "It's a good thing because it's a community gathering place," said Cliff Coleman, playing at one

of the tables. "You get [all] sexes, all ages, all ethnicities."

"You can meet all walks of life," said De-Shawn Wentz, his opponent. "No judgment here."

"It feels like a community really came together," said Conor Green, a chess buff and UC undergraduate. "It's just an interesting mix of people which I think represents the best of what Berkeley is: community from the ground up, not the top down."

That may be so. Still, Sheehan is basically a chess squatter. He doesn't own the property, which is the site of a vacant business called Mad Monk Center for Anachronistic Media.

Ken Sarachan does. In addition to the Mad Monk property, Sarachan owns Rasputin Records across the street.

Sarachan — a prosperous businessman, but an utterly hapless pawn in this game — is caught between a chess club that refuses to leave and the City of Berkeley, which demanded he oust the club.

The city's opposition was kindled by a complaint from a neighboring business. Perhaps it was the music. Sheehan blasts reggae (though when I visited, his stereo was playing Anita Ward's "Ring My Bell").

Code inspectors found sidewalk obstructions and violation of the property's use permit. They did not, however, cite Sheehan. They went after Sarachan. They slapped him with daily fines that would accrue until he booted the chess club.

The beleaguered Sarachan wrote to his councilman to protest that Sheehan and the

chess players had roosted on his property out of the blue.

“He never contacted us or spoke to us about it, he simply did it,” Sarachan wrote. “The Chess Club is not ‘ours.’ We have no relationship whatsoever with them. They pay no rent, and have never even suggested to us that they might do so. If we wanted them as tenants we would have a lease and benefit from them in some way. But we do not. We have no lease with them or any other agreement.”

Sarachan added that he feared ordering his employees to evict the chess club could put them at risk. But when he called police he says he was told the city did not want to be involved.

Instead, police “decided to tell us to, essentially, arrest the furniture,” and clear out the chess tables, wrote Sarachan. Dutifully hiring a junk removal company, Sarachan had them haul off the chess tables, sets, and a chess library Sheehan stored at night in a strong box on the premises.

“We were assured directly and unequivocally that if we hauled the stuff away, then the BPD would surely cite and arrest the people who trespassed,” Sarachan wrote. “So early in the morning we hauled all the

Chess Club stuff away. As soon as Jesse and the Chess Club arrived later in the morning, we called for the enforcement action.”

Alas, “Once again, BPD refused to do so.” Police stood by to keep the peace but made no arrests.

“For reasons they seem unwilling to provide, they will not cite and arrest Jesse for trespassing,” Sarachan plaintively wrote. “What are we supposed to do?”

Sheehan perceives police, and their code-enforcement counterparts, as the culprits. Following the Berkeley playbook, he tacked up strident flyers around the UC campus and Telegraph Avenue. They read:

Save Chess Club!
No More UC Gentrification!

On Sept. 29th, the city of Berkeley raided the community chess tables and seized everything ... The raid on the chess club is yet another attempt by the City of Berkeley to destroy public infrastructure built by members of the Berkeley community.

The flyer exhorted people to attend the next Berkeley City Council meeting: “Come

join us for sitting in, playing chess, and giving public comment in support of Chess Club.”

The call to arms worked. The chess raid garnered a surprising amount of press. The UC Berkeley Chess Club, as well as other students and club regulars, quickly donated replacement chess sets and tables. Within 48 hours the Telegraph Corner Chess Club was back up and running. And poor Sarachan continued to be fined.

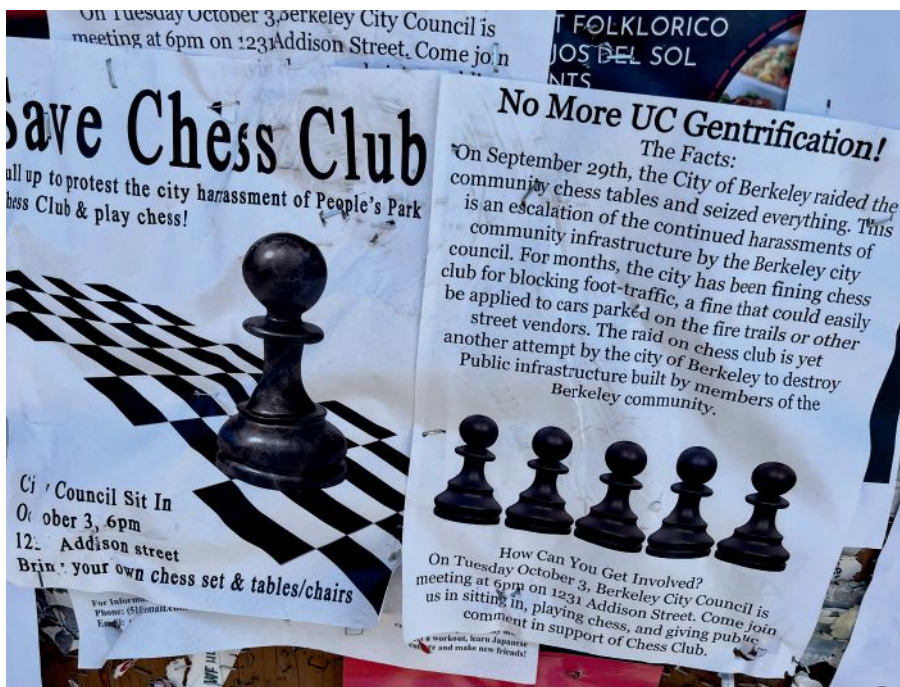
Protesters — concerned about the chess club, as well as presumptuous property owners who act as if they own their property — packed the council meeting. People sat on the floor, playing chess on numerous boards, and spoke in support of Sheehan. One protester dressed as a giant pawn. He held a sign: “Don’t *pawn* off our freedom of assembly.”

A former Berkeley mayoral candidate, Aidan Hill, a chess club regular, told council members that the chess club represented the “very essence” of community initiatives, while its closure is reeked of “profit-driven business divestment.”

Council member Kate Harrison, evidently recalling the heady days of hippie protests and tear gas, waxed nostalgic at the restive



PHOTO: MICHAEL FITZGERALD



crowd. “This is how I remember city council when I was a student,” she glowed.

Except, presumably, for the guy dressed as a pawn.

Sheehan wasn’t there to see it. The day before he had been arrested. A bystander’s video posted on an online site called Berkeley Copwatch shows three police hoisting Sheehan like a battering ram, carrying him out of the plaza, and stuffing him head-first into a patrol car.

“Less than 72 hours after BPD shut down the Chess Club (a community mainstay on Telegraph Ave), the organizer Jessie Sheehan was brutally arrested,” Copwatch grimly reported. “For hours, he was disappeared into the system, *tortured* (italics mine), abandoned at a hospital in Pleasanton, and then cited for spitting at a police officer and released.”

Sheehan claims police were so rough with him they took him to a hospital just in case. He was not subsequently jailed. The Alameda County District Attorney’s Office has not pursued charges, a DA spokesperson said.

Nothing inflames Berkeley protesters like alleged police brutality. At the next council meeting, chess protesters were joined by Copwatch followers. Cue more Bay Area TV and ink.

Social media had a field day. On Reddit, to cite one platform, people expressed disbelief.

“Shame on anyone who participated in the raid to shut down this uplifting and positive corner,” posted one Redditor. “Support chess for all!”

Police should focus on criminals, not chess nerds, huffed another: “This is like

going pawn grabbing when your queen is left hanging.”

Another kibitzer lamented, “People sitting playing chess is a menace to California. How can people feel safe? What will decent ordinary residents just trying to score some drugs, rob the local store or panhandle think of these dangerous rulebreakers?”

After two packed council meetings, Berkeley’s council “resigned,” acknowledging the public demand for open space along Telegraph Avenue, as well as a home for the chess club.

The council voted to appropriate \$25,000 to gussy up a nearby site, a Telegraph Avenue median called the Dwight Triangle, and offer it to Sheehan for his club.

But in the tradition of the late Grandmaster David Janowski, whom then-world champion Emanuel Lasker said loved won positions so much he could not bear to bring them to a victorious conclusion, Sheehan rejected the site.

“Exhaust fumes, traffic, you’re completely surrounded by traffic,” he said. “Not really an adequate spot.”

Sheehan held out for a variance to the city code that would allow him sidewalk space. He believed on principle that the benefits of the Telegraph Corner Chess Club outweigh the epic hassles he’d endured. Benefits such as grass-roots community, a sanctuary where diverse people tune in to the same wavelength, and, of course, good chess.

Amazingly, the Berkeley council agreed. In recent years city planners realized that Telegraph Avenue was an Old-School street designed more for cars than for people or placemaking. Consequently, the city drafted a long-range plan to improve the street’s

urbanism. The chess club fit the vision.

“The informal ‘chess club’ that has met on the block is a cherished community space that embodies Berkeley values of non-commercial, organic interactions between people of all ages and backgrounds...” wrote the district’s council member, Rigel Robinson, who also happens to be running for mayor. “In an increasingly commercialized and consumerist environment, free and communal activities such as gathering to play chess are a welcome and necessary use of public space.”

So the City of Berkeley allowed Sheehan to move the club onto the sidewalk. A guy who was down a queen against the powers that be actually notched the point.

“It’s kind of a representation of collective consciousness,” Sheehan said of his club. “Maybe I can get funding for researching humanity.”

Maybe he should get funding for Sarahan. As of this writing, he owes the City of Berkeley \$174,600. ♠

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