

Sicilian Defence*

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The Coronavirus confinement started right in the middle of the preparations of this book, distracting everybody, including the writers of Typo and myself. Staying safe and at home for two months was not as easy as one might think. But it gave us a chance to dust the bookshelves and organize old photographs. During these tidying sessions, some of you might have discovered a long forgotten object that once was of great significance to you. Well, I don't know about you, but I certainly did! I discovered something of deep sentimental value for me—both historically and psychologically—stashed in a small box: a set of handcrafted chess pieces.

My interest in chess goes back to my teenage years when I was a student at boarding school where playing chess was a long-established tradition at the time. I was not as good as some of my friends who were in the school's champion chess team, but I wasn't totally rubbish either. I tried to solve the chess puzzles published in the newspapers, knew the names of the greatest chess players by heart, and bought books to improve my game. I had a book by the Cuban World Champion José Raúl Capablanca to help me learn new opening tactics. I still remember how we followed the 1972 World Chess Championship match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky. We eagerly waited to see the game moves published the next day in the papers; it was so thrilling.

In another discarded box, I found my mini chess computer that was bought 35 years ago. Is the machine still working? Can I still play as good as I used to do? It remains to be seen. It was an exciting discovery, but certainly nothing compared to finding the handmade pieces. To elucidate their significance, I need to explain a period in Turkey's recent history.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the coup d'état that has shaped the country I was born and—for a certain period—lived in happily. On 12th September 1980, after years of political turmoil and terror, the army seized power amid a military coup in Turkey. Jeeps, tanks, armoured vehicles, and patrolling soldiers carrying automatic weapons invaded the streets. People were stopped and searched with their hands up, faces turned against a wall, reminiscent of the invading German army during World War II. All political parties and political activities were declared illegal. Hundreds of thousands of people were arrested, tortured, locked up, accused of treason. They were tried in military courts, denied defence, and sentenced to long-term imprisonments. And some were sentenced to death; just like 17-year-old Erdal Eren, who was executed by hanging on the 13th of December 1980. All left-wing press was banned. Mainstream media were heavily censored before going to press, with several pages or columns appearing blank in print. A retired general was appointed to form a cabinet to run the country under the supervision of the military junta. Another general was appointed as the head of the state-run TRT, the country's only TV and radio station at the time. Some ousted mainstream political party leaders and their wives were taken into custody and kept as hostages in army bases.

Most of the arrested were university students and young workers who were members or sympathizers of revolutionary socialist parties. I was one of those students. As a member, I was responsible for designing the publications. When the secret police raided our office and arrested me on the 10th of April 1981, I was laying-out the new issue of our underground anti-militarist magazine. I was put in a police jeep and taken to the “Second Division” Police Headquarters in Eminönü; when I got there, I realized that I was not alone. Apparently, after weeks of intelligence gathering and tracking, most of my friends and the leaders of the organization had also been arrested. That was the start of something I couldn’t have foreseen that day, a new “phase” that stole more than three years of my life and changed me forever.

Immediately after seizing power, the military regime extended the police custody period from two weeks to three months. They must have thought they would need more time for questioning— and torturing—the detainees, as well as working their way into getting them to sign statements accepting all the accusations brought forth by the police, whether true or false. Later, we were moved to the notorious Gayrettepe “First Division” Police Headquarters, which specialized in the interrogation of political dissidents. They put us in two square meter cells deep in the underground of the building. As we were always blindfolded with our heads forced down, there was no way of knowing where we were or where they were taking us. Is disorientating the suspect the first rule of a successful interrogation? Hmmm, where could I have seen this lately? Guantanamo perhaps?

We spent 90 days in those cells, sometimes eight of us together in one cell. They were overcrowded and unsanitary, devoid of light or fresh air. The loud and heavy metallic cell door had a small window used by the guards to check on us. Every day, several people were taken “upstairs”—as we called it among ourselves— in blindfolds to be interrogated. I don’t want to go into grueling details of the interrogations. I would rather concentrate on life “downstairs,” in the cells.

We were allowed very quick uses of the toilet twice a day, but not given time to shower, shave, change clothes, or brush our teeth. We could eat, but only if we paid for the food, and only what was available in the police canteen: bread; Karper cheese (similar to La Vache qui rit); black olives wrapped in a piece of newspaper; jam in mini plastic boxes, similar to the ones served at breakfast in some cheap hotels; and maybe a soft drink, not bottled but in cartons. There was no room in the cell for more food than that anyway. I don’t remember exactly, but I think the food “service” came only once a day.

A favourite pastime in the cooped-up cell, where there was no room for walking or lying down, was singing and chatting very quietly while standing or squatting. This was where I made those chess pieces— two sets— and smuggled one to a close friend in the opposite cell who liked playing chess. We whispered the moves to each other. Although the cells didn’t have lighting, there was always a faint light leaking from the corridor which was enough to see the pieces as our

eyes adjusted to the dark. I have no recollection of how many games we played or who won the games, but I managed to take my set with me out of the police dungeons to the military prison where we were transferred at the end of the 90-day interrogation. Later on, I must have given them to my family with my laundry during one of their visits, for they kept it safe for me until my release 3 years later. Some pieces are missing. I have no idea where they've gone, but I am glad that most are still with me.

I like to think of these chess pieces as my first "sculptures." They are made of chewed and dried bread. The black pieces, on the other hand, had olives remember our daily menu?—as the extra ingredient to give them a darker colour. Yes! You're seeing the "local" Mediterranean touch of the chef! It's been 40 years since I made these pieces, but they seem to be as solid as a rock, yet with the fragility of ceramic. I am so proud of them, and so happy to have rediscovered them in the cupboard thanks to the "Corontine" boredom. Who would have thought that bread would survive that long? Perhaps we shouldn't underestimate the magical "varnishing" qualities of human saliva. You can see the photos of the chess set on pages 52-53 of the artist book.

I believe that the founding stones of today's Turkish political system were laid during those days; a system where no leftist political view can legally get organized and gain power in the country. I have always wanted to do an exhibition based on my memories of the 80s. In place of the exhibition I am yet unable to have, I decided to publish this book. I hope it is visually strong enough to convey my feelings, because I can't really express them enough with words.

* The Sicilian Defence is a chess opening.