



DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/TIMES

AT HIS BROTHER'S insistence, Gunnar Madsen made a documentary film, "Svetlana Village," about the town's mentally disabled residents who work on an organic farm.

A different kind of village

Documentary about a Russian community offers international truths about the mentally disabled



THE VILLAGE PEOPLE: Minka, one of the residents of Svetlana, is shown here waltzing in a scene from the film.

By Cassandra Braun
TIMES STAFF WRITER

THE OLD ADAGE "It takes a village" may refer to children, but a new documentary reveals it can speak to adults as well.

Or so Gunnar Madsen discovered when he traveled to Russia to film a documentary on Svetlana, a small community of mentally disabled people and volunteers who have been successfully running an organic farm since 1994.

The result, "Svetlana: The Camphill Experience in Russia," which captures the farm during the busy harvest season, serves as an inspiring model for integrating the mentally disabled to become contributing members of society.

Although he's a first-time filmmaker, Madsen's name may be familiar. In the late '80s, he per-

MOVIE PREVIEW

- **WHAT:** "Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia"
- **WHERE:** Fine Arts Cinema, 2451 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley.
- **WHEN:** Friday-Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday, 9 p.m.
- **HOW MUCH:** \$4-\$8.
- **CALL:** 510-848-1143

formed with the popular, quirky a cappella group known as the "The Bobs."

After 10 years of traveling with the group, the Berkeley resident focused on composing music scores for movies and television, and dabbled in some acting.

The opportunity to go behind the camera came unexpectedly

about two years ago, when his brother, Peter Madsen, enlisted his help in a project. Peter had been living and working on the farm for five years and had fallen in love with the solidarity of the 30-member community. He asked Madsen to record their life on video to send to prospective donors.

Madsen was initially reluctant to take on the challenge.

The rigors of touring still fresh in his mind, Madsen said he was initially hesitant to travel the distance.

"I get a stomachache just dropping off my wife at the airport," he said.

Besides, Madsen had virtually no experience making movies. The full extent of his filmmaking credits included some employee training videos he made for his

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'Svetlana'

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father's sanitation company.

More importantly, though, Madsen held fears that are not unique about the world he would be entering.

"I was afraid to visit disabled people," Madsen admitted. "But when he asked for help it was time to face my fears and go for it."

After receiving minimal funding for the camera and film, Madsen set off for Russia. And from the moment he arrived at Svetlana, Madsen said he was instantly at ease.

"It really felt like an idealized village from 100 years ago," Madsen recalled. "The baker would walk by and everyone says hello. It was so different from what I imagined."

In Svetlana, the mentally disabled residents, called "villagers," work side by side with the "co-workers," the name given to the volunteers who run the organic farm. The villagers do everything from harvesting potatoes to milking the cows to making bread, while the "co-workers" are responsible for more complex tasks, such as setting up booths at the local farmers market to sell their cheeses and potatoes.

"It's a fascinating balance," Madsen said. "The co-workers have the intellectual capacity to think about and organize what work needs to be done. While the villagers are adept at other tasks, like milking."

Svetlana was created six years ago by Camphill, a nonprofit group, which in 1939 created the first such village in Aberdeen,

Scotland, as a place where the mentally disabled could contribute to a common goal and get the satisfaction of feeling like necessary, contributing members of society. The community became the model not only for Svetlana, but for more than 30 similar Camphill villages around the world, including several in the United States. One of newest communities opened in 1998 in Santa Cruz County.

Madsen spent nearly two weeks filming Svetlana. In the seven months of editing more than 30 hours of footage, he says he gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of the developmentally disabled, which has changed his own world view.

"For them, a weekly picnic is just as important as fixing the tractor," Madsen said. "They bring an ease of life that makes

this whole village thing work. You begin to see there's room for me and everyone else in the world. I had no idea how much that weighed on me."

Madsen has no plans to make documentary filmmaking a career but would leap at the chance if the ideal project came his way. Meanwhile, he plans to continue his music and recently released a children's album, "Ants in My Pants."

His brother, Peter, currently works at a Camphill Village in upstate New York. He continues to do fund raising for Camphill and will be speaking after each screening.

All proceeds from the screening will go to the organization.

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