

# Berkeley Daily Planet

Volume 3, Issue 40



Friday, May 25, 2001

## Experiences vast for 'Camphill' filmmaker

By PETER CRIMMINS  
DAILY PLANET CORRESPONDENT

Many people call them "retarded." In Russia, developmentally disabled people are "invalids."

In a small farming community called Svetlana (about 90 miles east of St. Petersburg) they are called "villagers."

They work the field, harvest potatoes, take them to market, and even build the buildings that make their village. They are part of a community organized by a few staff members and a trickling stream of volunteers in the rural Russian outback, where everyone learns from everyone else.

A video portraying this life, "Svetlana: the Camphill Experience in Russia," will have its premiere screening on Saturday. Director Gunnar Madsen, and his brother and Svetlana resident Peter will be in attendance.

Last Saturday Peter Madsen sat sitting in his brother's kitchen in west Berkeley. After eight years running the farming village in Svetlana, the Palo Alto native has picked up a slight Russian lilt in his voice. It's an accent that didn't come easily.

"When I did finally learn to speak Russian, I was amazed that they couldn't conceptualize someone who would come from so far just to help," Madsen said of his neighbors. "They laughed."

Developmentally disabled people in Russia are often ostracized, erroneously thought of as the result of an alcoholic pregnancy. Peter came to Svetlana because he had heard of the village that takes these children and adults and puts them to work. He discovered these "villagers" are vital for the community's long-term growth.

Gunnar said he had always wanted to visit his brother in his Russian home, but was not too thrilled about traveling halfway around the world to go to an impoverished Russian potato farm populated by disabled people.

Then he got a call from his mother. The farm needed funds,

'Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia'  
Fine Arts Cinema  
Saturday, May 26  
4p.m.

and Gunnar, a singer and founding member of the a cappella group The Bobs, had some experience making videos. Gunnar's trepidation turned to excitement. "If I could go and help my brother with a movie, then it was a grand adventure and I couldn't wait to buy the ticket. I'm going to Russia, to meet these amazing people. Yahoo! As soon as I had a task that would lead me to it, then it was fine."

Gunnar admitted that he was still afraid of meeting the community of mentally handicapped people, with visions of spooky insane asylums in his head. Upon arrival all his fears melted away.

"Half these people are disabled, but aside from a few Down syndrome people, you couldn't tell who is or who isn't. The lines are not that clearly drawn. Then it starts to sink in: Of course the lines are not clearly drawn, we're all people, and we all have our disabilities. And this happened after 10 minutes of being there."

The "Camphill Experience" in the title of the video is a reference to an education and community model begun by an Austrian pediatrician and educator named Dr. Karl Koenig who, in 1939, fled from the Nazis to Scotland. There, on an estate called Camphill, he began a community for developmentally disabled children. His educational system focused on the villagers' abilities, rather than their weaknesses. Mixing staff and volunteers with the villagers in all the communal work allows them to teach and learn from each other.

The original Camphill serves as a rough model for a network of Camphill communities throughout the world. There are almost 100 schools, villages, farms and institutions bearing the Camphill name in 20 countries.

Peter Madsen said mixing the more intelligent and efficient people with the "villagers" is critical to the success of the community. Social activities are recognized as of equal importance as daily chores, and the villagers input is regarded with the same gravity as that of village organizers.

"I thought it would be all the intellectually capable people that drive the thing forward," said Gunnar. "Like, 'Let them bake the bread while we figure out the finances for next year.' But they're included in the meetings. If you just had intellectual people in there, we start to get lost in ourselves."

"When are we going to have another picnic?" is one of the vehement interruptions you might hear from a villager in a

meeting. "And that becomes the main topic of discussion," Peter said. "Which one of us would have put our foot down and said, 'It's time for our picnic'? It becomes an imperative. And they're right."

Just as the film is a portrait of the Svetlana community, it is also pushing the hard sell. The Russian village is looking toward America for funds because charity in Russia, still in the wake of socialism, is almost unheard of. American industry is quickly descending on the newly opened Russian market, but philanthropic monies for charity organizations are not forthcoming.

Peter says he is beginning to seek grants. However, grant money is only given to organizations that have proven nonprofit

status, which is difficult to do from Russia because the government has no official standards for non-profit organizations.

There is a Camphill community in Northern California — just outside Santa Cruz — which might seem more hospitable than a Russian potato farm. But Peter Madsen says their challenges are much different.

"Theirs is with schmoozing with municipal health departments and proving themselves the better of the many good options for handicapped people," said Peter. "And that's maybe why it's so exciting to see what is happening in Camphill in Russia right now because it is so pioneering."

Peter Crimmins is the producer of "Film Close-Ups" on KALX radio in Berkeley.