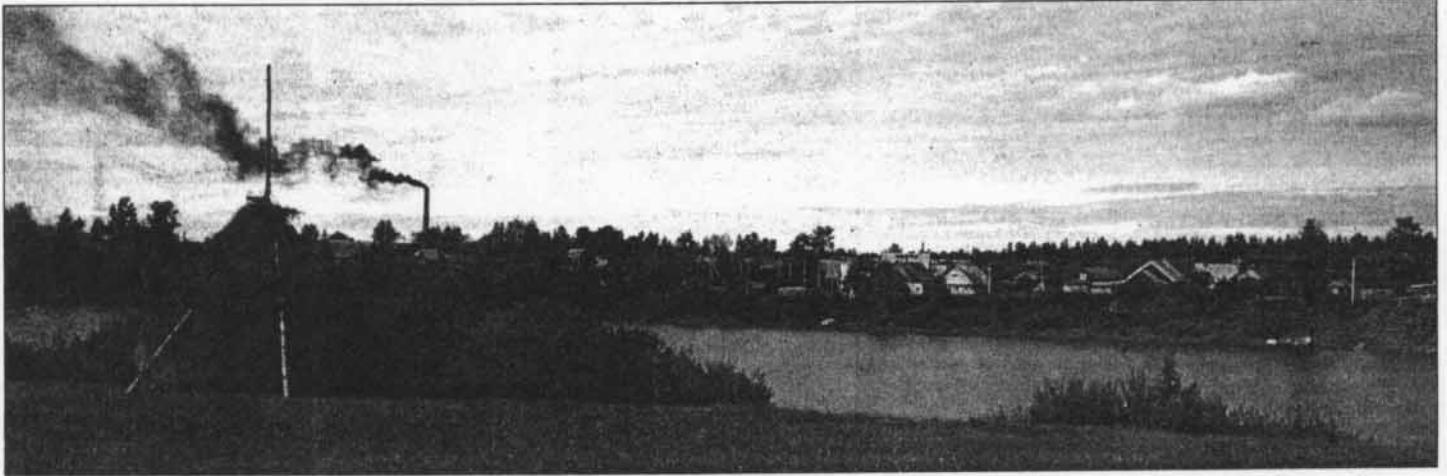


Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Robyn Israel



A view of Avrovo, a neighboring village situated across the Syaff River in northwestern Russia. Svetlana, shown in the foreground, has a dairy farm and also boasts doll and wood workshops.

IT TAKES A village

by Robyn Israel



Peter Madsen

A new film by Palo Altans Gunnar and Peter Madsen documents a Russian village where disabled people live and thrive

In Norse mythology there is a story about a ferocious wolf — the fennris — who threatened to swallow the world. Thor, the god of thunder, could not defeat him, despite the use of his mighty hammer. Nor could any of the other gods. Finally, the task fell to Vidar, whose power came not from a sword or hammer but rather from his shoes, which were made from left-over scraps. Vidar put his foot into the wolf's mouth and pushed his jaw wide open, causing the fennris to eat himself.

Vidaråsen, a village in Norway where disabled people live and work together with community volunteers, is named after that heroic Norse God. The name is highly appropriate, says Palo Alto native Peter Madsen, who spent three years working as a volunteer at Vidaråsen.

"There can still be light in the world if humanity chooses to bear the so-called scraps," he says. "They make it clear that the rest of us "normal," intellectual and efficient people are rather handicapped socially," Madsen says. "We manage to do a lot of things, but we don't manage to live together well."

After Vidaråsen, Madsen volunteered at Svetlana, a Russian farm community 90 miles east of St. Petersburg which, like its Norwegian counterpart, gives mentally disabled people the chance to live and work together. Established in 1992, the village is the first of its kind in Russia and is the subject of a new documentary by Madsen's brother Gunnar. Entitled "Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience in Russia," the film will screen on Sunday at the Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, as part of the annual Russian/American festival.

Filed last August over 10 days, "Svetlana Village" profiles one hectic week during the farm's harvest. All the crops, including 40 tons of potatoes, must be brought in, and a surprise invitation from the farmer's market offers them their first chance in their five-year history to sell their produce openly without mafia intervention. Overwhelmed, they ask for help from the local villages. Students from schools are given leave to help with the harvest, and neighbors pitch in with phenomenal generosity.

Funded by a local foundation, the \$20,000 documentary marked Gunnar's first stab at directing and producing a film. A professional musician and a founding member of the cappella group the Bobs (he, along with songwriting partner Richard Greene, received a Grammy nomination in 1984), Gunnar's only previous experience with film had been an instructional video he had made for the Palo Alto Sanitation Company, which until 1998 was managed by his father Paul.

During his 10-day stay, Gunnar learned how involved the villagers are in all aspects of the farm, from harvesting potatoes to sitting in on meetings. Like innocent, earnest children, they will suggest fun activities, like going on picnics or gathering seashells.

"They talk about things that really matter to them," says Gunnar, now a Berkeley resident. "It makes everybody smile and slow down. It changes the whole tenor of the meeting. That blew my mind."

"They ground the rest of us in a similar way that children do," adds Madsen, who assisted his brother with translating, as well as editing the film.

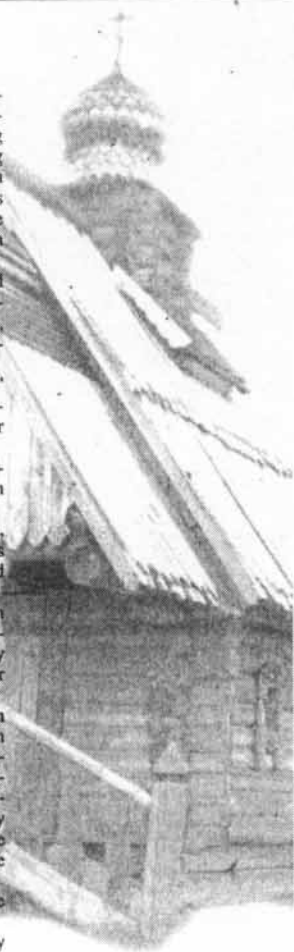
Parents, Madsen said, take an active role at Svetlana, more so than at Vidaråsen. Even the village's name is dedicated to the mother of a disabled child who lobbied to get the village started.

"It was beautiful to see," he recalls. "They'd help with harvesting, pickling, looking after the house. Their openly warm gratitude was its open reward. Hardly a day went by where you didn't know the meaning of your day."

Disabled people in Russia are normally faced with two options: living with their families, or being placed in institutions, neither of which offers them the opportunity to work and function as productive members of society. During Soviet times, there was also a stigma associated with being the mother of a developmentally delayed child, since the disability was thought to be the result of an alcoholic pregnancy. Many mothers were consequently encouraged to give up their children.

"For a mother to keep her child was an act of defiance and love for her child," Madsen says.

Madsen first learned about Vidaråsen in college, by





Clockwise: Peter Madsen (left) and a Norwegian student help build Svetlana's root cellar; German fiddler Veronika DeVries, guitarist Peter Madsen and villager Lena Ivanova, seen playing the triangle, collaborate at a community folk dance; mealtimes at Svetlana are considered a daily celebration.



Oksana Gregoreva (left) and Julia Sosyedova proudly show off two of the dolls manufactured at Svetlana.

reading a book by University of Oslo criminology professor Nils Christie. Fascinated by the place, Madsen decided to visit the Norwegian village while traveling through Europe after graduating from Evergreen State College. Nervous at first about interacting with disabled people, Madsen's fears melted when he was led through the village.

"You come to a setting where the people aren't disabled," Madsen recalls. "They're villagers. And there's no stigma associated with that. I realized this isn't a camp or institution. They're creating a modern form of a village community."

Madsen fell in love with the place and stayed three years, becoming proficient in organic farming practices. In 1996, he moved on to Svetlana to assist the fledgling village in its development. He stayed there five years, returning to the Bay Area this year (he plans to relocate with his family later this summer to Camphill Village U.S.A., a similar facility in upstate New York).

The film, Madsen says, is being used to raise
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Village

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funds for Svetlana, which requires \$3,000 per month to operate. The current fund-raising drive is an attempt to establish a million-dollar supporting fund, the interest of which would provide Svetlana with enough money to cover running costs, as well as a capital contingency fund.

There are almost 100 schools, villages and farms bearing the Camphill name in 20 countries, including the United States (the nearest one is situated in Soquel, which was set up four years ago). The model was begun by Dr. Karl Koenig, an Austrian pediatrician and educator who fled the Nazis in 1939 and settled in Scotland. There, on an estate named Camphill, he began a community for developmentally disabled children.

Svetlana now has 14 villagers ranging in age from 18 to 34, most of whom hail from the surrounding region; a couple are from Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Ten co-workers live with them, representing a variety of countries. Despite primitive conditions - the place reminded Gunnar of pioneers in the Old West who had just stepped off their Conestoga wagons — a joyous spirit pervades the place.

And after Gunnar's trip to Russia - his first ever - he came to fully understand what had taken his brother halfway around the world to such a distant place.

"I'd wondered if he'd gone on some missionary binge," Gunnar says. "But when I witnessed what was going on, I saw how he got sucked in. The challenges there are so immediate, and the villagers are having such a good time. How *could* you leave? Not out of guilt, but there's so much to accomplish. I could see how infectious it was." ■

About the cover:

Several of Svetlana's villagers take a break from their farm duties.

What: "Svetlana Village: The Camphill Experience," a film by Gunnar and Peter Madsen. A Q & A with Peter Madsen will follow the screening.

Where: The Albert L. Schultz Jewish Community Center, 655 Arastradero Rd. in Palo Alto. The screening will take place in the community room.

When: 12:30 p.m. Sunday

Cost: Admission is free, but donations are encouraged.

Info: Call (650) 493-8268 or visit www.camphillsvetlana.org

"Celebration at the Rim," a gala benefit concert for Camphill Communities California, will take place on Oct. 21 at 7:30 p.m. at the Herbst Theatre 401 Van Ness Ave. in San Francisco. The performance will feature internationally acclaimed mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, accompanied by "Dead Man Walking" composer and pianist Jake Heggie. Metropolitan Opera stars Anna Netrebko, Dwayne Croft and Paul Groves will also perform. Ticket purchases are tax-deductible. For more information call (415) 387-1148 or e-mail kteevar@pacbell.net