

# Svetlana Village Offers Therapeutic Refuge

By Jennifer Davis  
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SVETLANA, Leningrad Oblast — Some 160 kilometers east of the hustle and bustle of St. Petersburg, nestled in the fertile, river-crossed lands surrounding Lake Ladoga, exists a small, unassuming community named Camphill-Svetlana.

Usually called simply Svetlana, the village is home to an international group of nearly 40 people who are transforming the landscape for Russians with disabilities.

Svetlana, a fully-integrated community for people with special needs, is the only one of its kind in Russia. It was founded in 1992 as a joint venture between a group of Russians and the Camphill Village Trust of Norway, and is affiliated to the international Camphill organization.

Almost 100 village communities in Europe, the United States, Canada, Africa and India are members of the organization that was launched in 1939 by Austrian pediatrician Karl Koenig. Camphill aims to establish communities where each person contributes to village life to the best of their ability, regardless of any mental or physical handicap.

"The idea behind Svetlana Village and all Camphill communities is to recreate social life," said Svetlana's British director, Mark Barber. "In modern society, people are increasingly lonely and living ever-more anti-social lives. The wonderful thing about Camphill is that it's such a positive attempt to recreate the world. Many people, both those with special needs and volunteers, have found their salvation here."

## FARMING IDYLL

Traditional village life revolves around the farm, and Svetlana Village is no exception. Its farm has a barn housing 10 dairy cows and several pigs, an adjoining dairy to process milk, cheese and other products, a garden, grain fields, a herb workshop and an earth cellar. A bakery and doll workshop are also on site.

People with special needs, who are referred to as "villagers" live together with volunteers, referred to as "coworkers" in three separate houses, where they share meals and various household duties like food preparation and cleaning. A fourth house is under construction thanks to a donation from the Village Trust of Norway.

The disabled, who were reasonably well looked after in Soviet times, have little support in contemporary Russia.

Children with special needs can be a huge burden for already financially-strapped families, and doctors often encourage parents to leave their children in the care of understaffed and overcrowded *internaty*, institutions where they receive little, if any, personal attention.

Svetlana doesn't advertise, so information about the village travels by word of mouth. Interested families independently approach Svetlana and the village isn't able to accept any applicants from institutions.

"We've tried to take people from internats, but legally we have no way to keep them," Barber said. "Unfortunately, we're in this position where we can only take people from parents or guardians."

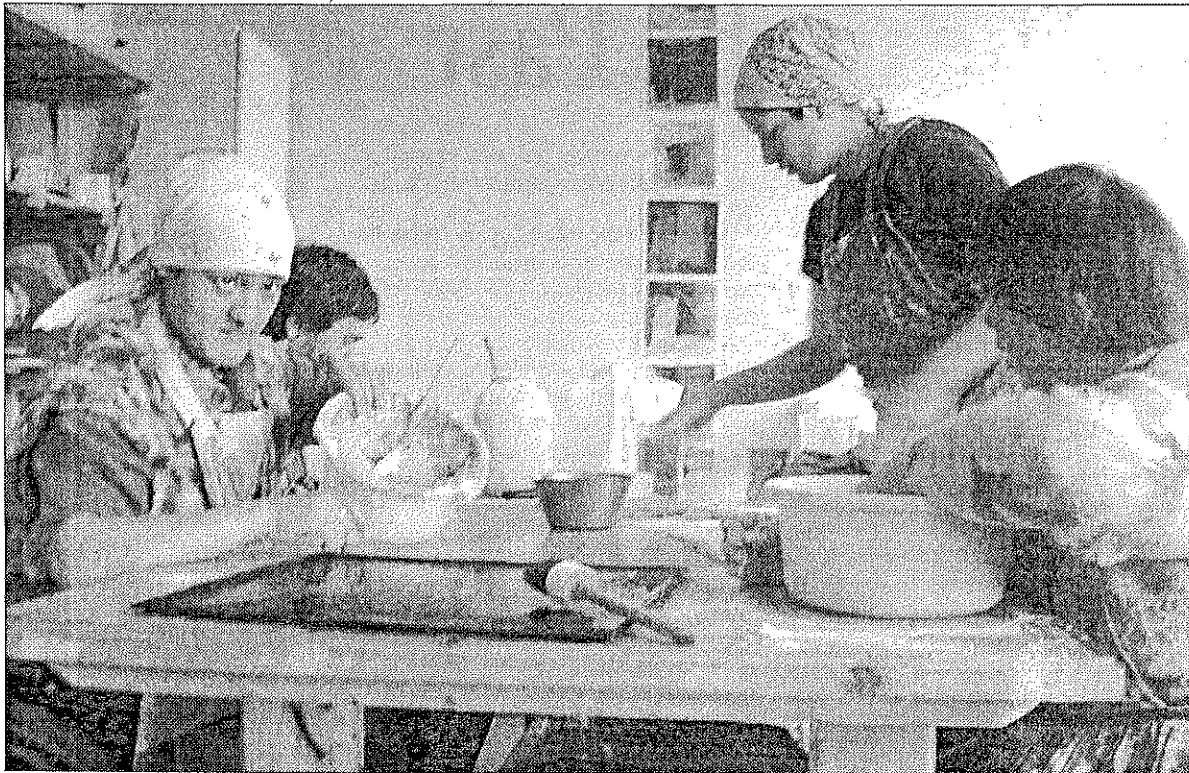
A group of long-term coworkers assesses prospective applicants for their suitability for living in Svetlana's relatively unstructured environment.

## INTEGRAL ROLE

Barber insists that Camphill-Svetlana is not merely a community for people with disabilities, but rather a community where they play an integral role.

"When villagers arrive, we don't look at their abilities and decide where they fit in," he said. "Instead, we look at what the village needs."

"In this way, they are not constantly reminded of their disabilities. In fact, it's quite the reverse, a great deal is expected of them. They sense that and that's why amazing things happen here."



Coworkers and villagers at Svetlana bake in the kitchen. Many of the products they eat are produced on their own farm.

They aren't just invalids doing some useless therapeutic work."

Wheelchair-bound Lena came to Svetlana from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1999 and works in the bakery, where she actively engages others in lengthy conversations about philosophy and politics.

"When I got here for the first time, it was hard to get used to living without my family," she said. "At home, my family helped me do everything and here I had to learn how to take care of myself. This is especially hard for someone in a wheelchair."

## An international community of volunteers cares for the handicapped villagers.

"In my opinion, this is the best place in Russia for the handicapped. It's not perfect, because there are still several areas in Svetlana that are not wheelchair accessible. However, I wish there were more places like Svetlana and I hope this place lasts forever."

## FARMER IN CHIEF

Minka, who has Down Syndrome, is something of a celebrity in the village. Thanks to his flamboyant, charming personality, he regularly takes part in Svetlana's cultural events and is an active participant in the weekly village meetings held every Monday night.

One long-term coworker remembers when Minka first arrived in 1997.

"He was assigned to help milk the cows each morning. At first, Minka was very frightened of the cows. He was just supposed to hold the cows' tails while I milked them. Within a couple of months, he started milking the cows independently and eventually he was the one waking me up at 6 a.m., pails in hand, ready to get to work." Today, Minka proudly calls himself "Farmer in Chief."

The coworkers hail from Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, Russia, and the United States. Although volunteers generally come to Svetlana to work with people with special needs or simply to experience life in a rural community, many are also here to study farming, specifically biodynamic farming, which is practiced in all Camphill villages.

## SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

Biodynamics, a form of organic farming developed by German philosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924, views the farm as a self-sustaining organism within the surrounding ecosystem, where both

livestock and humans are emphasized as an important component.

"In traditional agriculture, the goal is to extract from the earth," said Barber. "In biodynamic farming, the goal is to heal the earth. One of the great tragedies of our age is that we've lost a spiritual connection to the land. Biodynamic farming re-establishes that connection. In fact, this is the same concept in our work with the handicapped. We hope that by helping these people with special needs we will also heal ourselves."

Barber is one of several coworkers who have lived in Svetlana for years and have started families there. Others come for shorter periods of six months to a year. As Svetlana is considered a "life-sharing community," both coworkers and villagers are welcome to stay as long as they like.

Gamlet Saakyan, a coworker from Armenia, has lived and worked on the farm with his wife, Yelena, and his five-year-old son, Ilya, since 2000.

"The great thing is my son doesn't notice the difference between villagers and coworkers," he said. "He treats everyone the same. It's wonderful to see."

## WELCOMED BY LOCALS

Sven Dietsche from Freiburg, Germany is fulfilling his year of compulsory alternative service to the German military at Svetlana. He's been in charge of the cheese workshop since his arrival last

summer, where he makes hard cheese, brinza, and *tvorog* (quark cheese) with villager Yulia.

Dietsche was by no means an accomplished cheesemaker before he arrived in Svetlana. "I was introduced to the cheesemaking process in one day and the next day, I was on my own," said Dietsche. "After a few months alone, Yulia came to work with me and it's been a great experience for the both of us. At first, it was really frustrating, because Yulia didn't understand what was going on and couldn't remember the steps. Now, she tells me what to do!"

Dietsche and several villagers go to the nearby market in Volkhov every Sunday to sell their wares.

"We weren't very welcome there in the beginning," Dietsche recalled. "We'd get a lot of stares and few people stopped at our stand. Now, we've become quite famous. The locals like to come by to chat with me and the villagers and ask questions about Svetlana."

Mary Millsap from Fort Worth, Texas, arrived deep in the winter, with no Russian-language skills. She has been working in the bakery since last February, where she bakes bread, cookies and pies for 40 in one household oven.

"When I got here I could only say *do svidaniya* (goodbye), but the villagers have taught me little by little," she said. "They've developed a special way to communicate with me using simple

words and hand signals so that I understand. They are extremely patient."

## FINANCIAL WORRIES

Although Russian authorities gave Camphill-Svetlana the land it occupies free of charge, the village does not receive any regular contributions from either the Russian government or private foundations and does not charge residents to live there.

"This place wouldn't exist without the help of the Camphill Village Trust of Norway," Barber said. "We don't currently pay rent, but this could end at any time. We don't receive any money or subsidies from the government, except for the villagers' state payments—about 1,000 rubles [\$34.50] per person a month."

Last year, Camphill-Svetlana covered 30 percent of its operating costs independently — a landmark achievement in its 12-year history. But to survive Svetlana relies on donations from private organizations or individuals and is seeking stable funding sources.

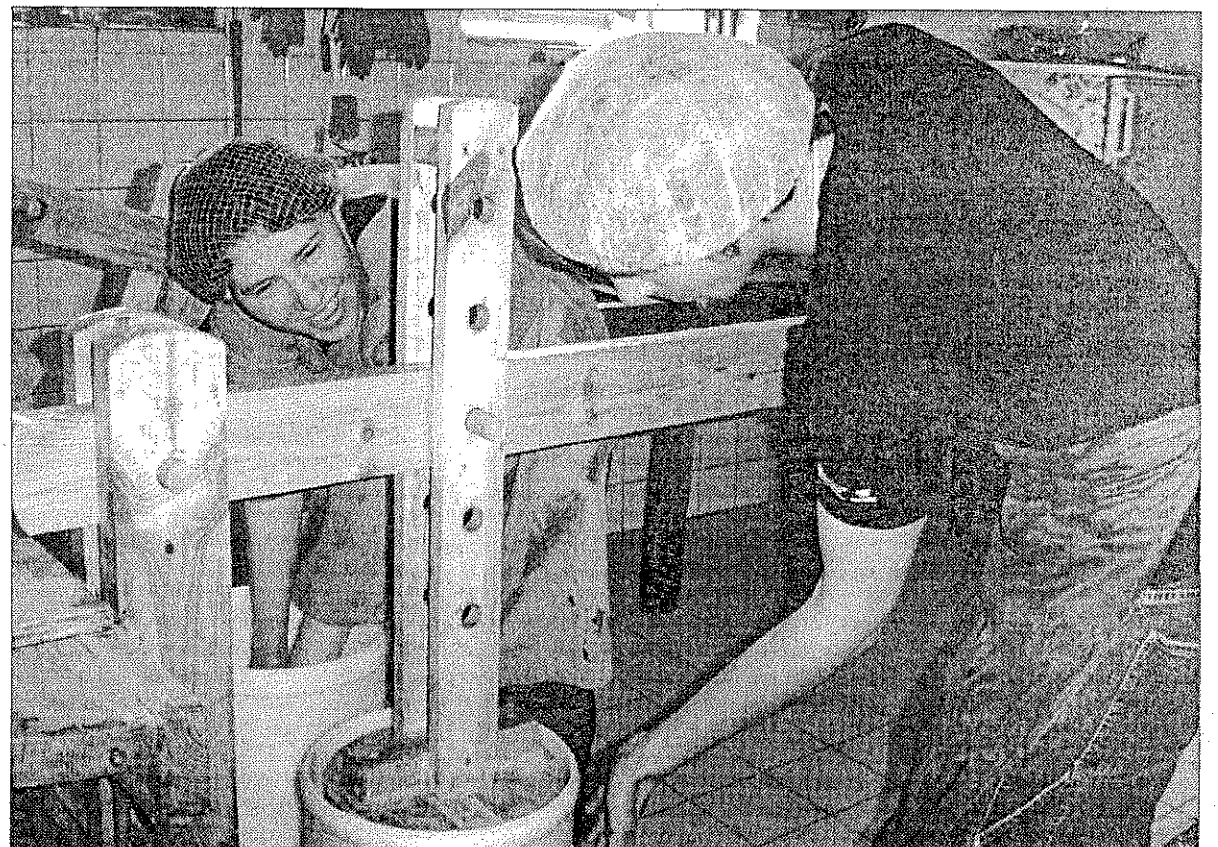
"Our electricity bill alone can run up to 1,000 euros [\$1,220] a month," said Barber. "We will not in the foreseeable future be able to fully cover our costs without help. However, foreign sponsors are increasingly asking why the Russian business community cannot begin supporting such a project on their home soil."

Gifts in kind are also most welcome. Svetlana has but only one vehicle, a dilapidated Russian Niva jeep, which, between trips to the repair shop, is loaded up with goods for the Sunday market and is unable to meet the needs of the community as a whole. Lack of transportation also precludes the village from organizing field trips to St. Petersburg or the surrounding area, much to the chagrin of many of the younger villagers.

At the end of the day, the glue that holds Camphill-Svetlana together against all odds is the hardworking people who treat each member of the community with respect and kindness.

"The thing about these people with special needs is that they have amazing social skills," said Barber. "I think normal people are socially handicapped in a way. In the last 30 to 40 years there have been many attempts to create communities. Usually, they end badly. One of the great secrets of Camphill is that at the center of the community there are these people with special needs. And that is what somehow makes it possible for us all to live together."

For more information about Camphill-Svetlana, see [www.camphillsvetlana.org](http://www.camphillsvetlana.org). If you'd like to make a donation or volunteer, contact Mark Barber: [dsvet1@yandex.ru](mailto:dsvet1@yandex.ru).



Sven Dietsche and Yulia using a cheese press in the Svetlana dairy. Some of the products they make are sold at a market.