

Leader of ‘America’s Fastest Growing Cult’ is remanded to jail in Los Angeles

Danish businessman faces extradition to Europe for embezzlement from Canadian volunteer “charities”

By Michael Durham

Online Journal Contributing Writer

March 20, 2002—Mogens Amdi Petersen, a 63 year old Danish national, who is facing extradition to Denmark on fraud and embezzlement charges, was again denied bail by Judge Stephen J. Hillman during yesterday’s appearance in Los Angeles Federal District Court. Petersen has hired Robert Shapiro, the lawyer who defended OJ Simpson, as his defense attorney.

Petersen’s private and largely secret business empire is associated with several “non-profit” clothing recycling companies, with colorful collection boxes in major U.S. cities, including Washington, Boston, New York and Chicago. The empire, known to insiders as “Tvind” for its Danish headquarters, also recruits U.S. members for a cult-like organization through international volunteer programs based in California, Massachusetts, and Michigan. Former members allege that profits from the sale of recycled clothes, and program fees paid by volunteers, are used to build Tvind assets, rather than helping the poor in developing countries, or preserving the environment, as Tvind’s leadership claims.

In fact, as European newspapers report, Petersen and his Danish girl friend Kirsten Larsen have at their private disposal two \$6 million apartments in the exclusive millionaire’s resort of Fisher Island, Miami, other luxury properties throughout the world, and one of the world’s largest private ocean-going yachts, the Butterfly McQueen.

U.S. charities and companies associated with Petersen and Tvind include Planet Aid (based on Wall Street), Gaia, U’SAgain, Garson & Shaw, Institute for International Cooperation and Development (in Massachusetts and Michigan), and Campus California Teachers Group.

The under-the-line business empire reaches into 50 countries, with literally hundreds of associated companies, offshore accounts and more than 150 apparently charitable enterprises. Petersen himself has been in hiding for 22 years, travelling the world incognito. In December he was placed on a wanted list by Danish police, and picked up by the FBI at Los Angeles International Airport on February 17th on an Interpol arrest warrant. He was refused bail pending extradition on Danish police charges of fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion.

Charismatic Leader of “Fastest Growing Cult”

Petersen is notorious in Denmark and other European countries, but virtually unknown in the United States, though he has had operations here since the early 1980's. He is asserted to be the leader of an international cult-like political organization, a Svengali-like figure who exploits young followers and has cynically enriched himself by millions of dollars. He has been compared with Sun Myung Moon, L. Ron Hubbard and other charismatic and manipulative leaders.

Most people in the US have never heard of him and are completely unaware that, in recent years, Petersen has built up a formidable commercial empire in the United States. Hundreds of Americans—especially young college graduates—have unwittingly supported Petersen's business empire by paying thousands of dollars to volunteer in Africa and Latin America on projects with questionable development outcomes. During a "training" period, volunteers are expected to raise additional funds selling postcards and seeking donations in cities all over the United States, one of the Tvind practices that critics claim is typical of cult behavior.

Thousands of other Americans have given money or used clothes in the belief they are helping a charity. A few Americans are full-time adherents of the Tvind "Teachers Group," which ex-members claim is a cult led by Petersen for the enrichment of his business empire.

According to the Teachers Group's own web site, "You don't join the Teachers Group part-time and with conditions. It is a full-time commitment involving all parts of your life, day and night, work and leisure, private as well as common issues."

Members report being pressured to donate their life savings to the Teacher Group, and to cut off ties with friends and family. Teachers Group members do not receive salaries, but rely on Tvind for their room and board.

Investigative Web Site

Long suspected, Amdi Petersen's Tvind empire has been extensively examined in the Scandinavian press. In 1999 Michael Durham, a leading London-based journalist, set up an investigative web site (www.tvindalert.org.uk) to attract information on Tvind's global network through the world wide web.

Originally a one-man operation, Tvind Alert has drawn support from concerned journalists, academics and ex-cult members throughout the world, as well as inquiries from thousands of ordinary citizens. Nearly 38,000 people have visited the site in just over two years.

A number of people are now working together via the Internet to further lift the lid on the secretive Tvind empire in many countries, while legal action is under way against the founder. The Tvind Alert web site is a free resource and holds the best dossier of information on Mogens Amdi Petersen available in English.

Tvind Alert can supply the names and contact details of many Americans who have had experience of Tvind (as overseas volunteers, 'trainees' or former members) who are available for interviews.

Companies and charities associated with Amdi Petersen in the United States are:

Planet Aid: 82 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005

One Cross Street, Holliston, MA 01746

1117 Hancock Road, Williamstown, MA 01267. (413) 458-2850

Gaia: 2918 N. Clark Street, Chicago, IL. (773) 348-4405

1318 N. Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago, IL

U'SAgain: 860 N. State Street, Elgin, IL 60123. 847-717-4223

Garson & Shaw: 949 W. Marietta Street, Suite X-109, Atlanta, GA 30318. (404) 879-9916

The Institute for International Cooperation and Development (IICD)

IICD-Massachusetts: 1117 Hancock Road, Williamstown, MA 10267. (413) 458-9828

IICD-Michigan: 56968 Dailey Road, Dowagiac, MI 49047. (616) 782-0392

Campus California Teachers Group (CCTG): P.O. Box 854, Etna, CA.

Other widely used names are: Humana People-to-People, Development Aid from People to People (DAPP), TCE, etc. Associated real estate and holding companies include: Brookwood, A.S. Properties, Argyll Smith, and many others.

Michael Durham (founder of Tvind Alert web site): UK national newspaper journalist, former staffer for the London Sunday Times, Daily Telegraph and Observer; author of a number of articles about Amdi Petersen, including 'Inside the Mind of a Secret Cult' (the Times, London) and 'Rags to Riches: the Humana Story' (the Observer). Contact: michael.durham@journalist.co.uk, or telephone UK cellphone: 011 44 7775 531612.

Marianna Maver is an American former employee of the Tvind-run International School Ake Pecha, a residential treatment facility for emotionally disturbed minor wards of the courts of Virginia (1984-'85). She brought the questionable practices at the International School to the attention of Virginia authorities, which resulted in the recession of the school's license in July of 1985. Contact: maver@wamol.com , (616) 857-4170.

The Tvind Alert web site is at <http://www.tvindalert.org.uk>