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Foreign writer sees 'black side' to church

By LAURIE HOLLMAN
Clearwater Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — Sven Egil Omdal watched the Clearwater City Commission's public hearings on Scientology and then returned to the Surfside Holiday Inn Wednesday evening — to find the door to his room ajar.

He is sure he had locked it.

He is also sure the incident has something to do with a visit the 29-year-old Norwegian journalist made earlier in the day. He went to the former Fort Harrison Hotel, nerve center of the Clearwater-based church, and proffered his business card.

It says he is a staff reporter for *Vart-Land*, an Oslo newspaper with a nationwide circulation of 30,000. It does not say he investigates cults or that he reports on the church or that he is doing research for a book on Scientology, but the blond, blue-eyed Omdal figures that Scientologists know that already.

THE BOOK is why Omdal stopped in Clearwater, fresh from covering the war in El Salvador. After seeing the bodies of murdered children, listening to guerrillas describe their adventures, trying to uncover what happened to four Dutch journalists killed in the Central American country, snatching white towels from hotels with hopes that terrycloth can protect him from gunfire, Omdal jokes that he is blasé about bizarre goings-on in Clearwater.

Wednesday night he simply notified the security people at the hotel and switched rooms.

Many of the American reporters covering the hearings have ambivalent feelings about what the city of Clearwater is doing.



SVEN EGIL OMDAL

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Omdal does not.

"It's important to show the black side of Scientology," he says from a chair beside the Holiday Inn pool, where he has gone during an intermission in the hearings. "It's the duty of authorities" to look into the church, he says.

"A fraud is a fraud," he adds.

Omdal started researching cults in the early '70s when Children of God became popular in Norway. He was curious about the group's transformation from an almost conventional religion to an organization in which women were encouraged to become prostitutes.

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HE WROTE a series of articles on Children of God for his hometown paper in western Norway, and they captured the eye of a publishing house. Omdal turned the pieces into a book, which was published in 1974 and sold 3,000 copies.

His research brought him into contact with various cults, including the Unification Church, and he began collecting information on and writing about them.

In the spring of 1980, "everybody in Norway seemed to be talking about Scientology," and Omdal turned his attention to the church.

"As soon as I started writing," he recalls, "the Scientologists started fighting back."

Church members phoned him continuously, he says, deluged him with information — "to try to keep me busy" — stalked his movements and somehow found out that he was going to write a book about the church long before he had made it public knowledge.

DESPITE ALL this, Omdal managed to report on the clash between the Norwegian government and the church. He wrote about how the state consumer ombudsmen forbade the church from advertising its E-meter as a panacea for spiritual ailments. He also wrote about the church's application to start a drug-rehabilitation Narconon program in Norway. Permission to provide medical services is a boon in that country because the state takes care of expenses, he says.

Paulette Cooper, an outspoken critic of Scientology, credits Omdal with reducing the membership of the church in Norway from 1,000 people to less than 100.

Omdal says the church is much quieter now but gives credit to the Norwegian government.

Two facts of Norwegian life make it easier for that country to regulate Scientology, he says. Since Norway has an official church — the Evangelical Lutheran Church — there is no sharp delineation between church and state. Here, Scientologists have an easier time claiming that hostile governments violate their rights to practice their religion as they see fit.

Also, Norwegians are prevented from filing numerous lawsuits against their foes because they have to be prepared to pay all the expenses if they lose.