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Svetlana Doyle

Written by Bob Rashid

Growing up in Russia, Svetlana Doyle never imagined she would eventually call Madison home. But fate had different plans.

Born in Russia under a communist regime, Svetlana Doyle now lives in Madison with her family. She's a very happy woman. But life hasn't always been kind to her.

Living in Almaty, Kazakhstan before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Doyle (then Kazachenko) suffered tremendous deprivations when, in 1991, Kazakhstan became a republic and its lifeline to Russia and the rest of the world was severed.

Four years later, Kazachenko landed a fortuitous job as administrator for Prime Kare Kazakhstan, a humanitarian aid program that was organized after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Funded by the Concordia Mission Society, the organization provides medical and dental care for children and pregnant women in Almaty Oblast, an area that's home to 3 million people. Since half the population lives in rural areas, a clinic-on-wheels, (actually a semi-trailer that's 53-feet long), proved to be the perfect way to reach them. And although local pediatricians and dentists staff the van, volunteers still visit Kazakhstan to lend their support. One of those volunteers is the project's director, Dr. John Doyle, a UW professor and medical director for dental services at University Hospital and Clinics. Dr. Doyle has returned to Kazakhstan 25 times to supervise the program. Little did he know that during one of those visits, he would meet the woman who would become the love of his life.

In 1995, Svetlana Kazachenko was introduced to Dr. John Doyle. The lives they were leading couldn't have been more different but the two shared a vision for helping others. They fell in love and were married later that year.



I first met Kazachenko – soon to be Doyle – that same year, when I accompanied the group of volunteers who made their first visit to set up the medical van.

Doyle is someone whose personality can best be described as lively - she's been known to break into song at the dinner table - and she never loses hope. This brave woman took the job as administrator even though she didn't speak a word of English. Ten years ago, she made the decision to move to Madison with her new husband, bringing two of her three children with her. Her oldest daughter was already married.

I recently talked with Doyle in the lobby of the Hotel Kazakhstan, the day after a banquet honoring her husband's 10 years of humanitarian aid to the country. From the hotel windows we could see the snowy Tian Shan Mountains that shape Kazakhstan's border with China. As we spoke, Doyle shared her thoughts on living in America, on her former life in Kazakhstan, and on finding happiness where she least expected it.

BR: Tell me about the place you were born.

Svetlana Doyle: I'm originally from northern Russia - a town called Molotovsk that was built in 1937. It was built because there was a submarine factory there. The town grew when the submarine factory needed workers. This was where my mom and dad met, and where I was born.

BR: Your original language is Russian. How long did it take you to learn English?

SD: I think I'll be learning it all my life!

BR: When you arrived in the United States you knew very little English. How did you manage?

SD: (Laughs.) It was not easy. How? I think because I was lucky. I think it was because the people around were really nice to me, and patient. At first, I knew very few words. I knew, "I'm hungry", "hello", "good-bye". I don't know how we understood each other. I had a dictionary and if I wanted to say something I opened it to the word and showed it. Everybody in Madison – John's friends – everybody remembers this book. I did not go to dinner or somewhere without this book. I had the dictionary everywhere.

BR: You grew up under the political leadership of Nikita Khrushchev at a time when the USSR and US were immersed in a cold war. As a child, how were you taught to view the United States?

SD: When I was a child, I didn't care about the cold war. I just lived in this town and had a regular life. We had a television station and a small television set with no broadcasts about the United States. It was just news about corn growing everywhere. We never talked about politics in our house because my mom, she was such a hard worker. She had two of us, my brother and me. My father died when I was eight years old. In our minds we just thought about how to keep our life easy. That's it. We weren't interested in politics.

BR: Later, the Soviet Union collapsed and Kazakhstan became a Republic. How did things change for you and your friends?

SD: It was terrible. I don't think all of these republics were ready to do this. Money changed, it was a mess. Many people lost jobs and nobody understood what happened. It was like people in the depression. Our people saved money in a bank, like retirement money. Maybe they saved money for all their life and lost everything in one day. We didn't know what we could do. Everything was destroyed and everyone started to look around and see what they could do, and how to put everything back together and pay for their bills. It was just a mess.

BR: In 1995, you became an administrator for Prime Kare Kazakhstan. How did that job change your life?

SD: (Laughs.) My life went upside down. I never thought it could happen. Eleven years ago, if you tried to tell me that I would be speaking English, driving a car, and living in a beautiful city called Madison, I would probably start laughing. I would not believe this. When I talk to my friends about

what happened to me, they say, "No way – it's like a movie." I say, "It's not a movie, it's my story. It's my life story."

In the beginning when you came with your group and we came from Talgar (a suburb of Almaty) nobody spoke Russian, nobody spoke English. But we worked together. Remember? How we understood each other, who knows? And who cares. I don't know how we talked. We had just two translators. How many of us? It was like twelve Americans and all of our people and everybody talked without a translator.

It was not my plan. I never thought, okay, I'll go to the United States, I'll marry this American guy, I will live here, there. That's not true. My life has changed, yes, absolutely. Not because I wanted to. It's because it happened. And who knows why. Who knows? It's made me very happy and happy for my children.

BR: You've been back to Kazakhstan many times to help with Prime Kare Kazakhstan since moving to the US. How do you help with the medical mission?

SD: My husband is a very gentle man. He loves to do this. You know, he's a volunteer. He's a professional. He's a dentist who has a blessing from God. I think like this about him. And when he teaches people dental technique - because (Russians) have a different way, the material is different, all of the machinery is different – he loves to do this. He loves to do this. It's his life. It like what we call a hobby. This is his hobby for life. And I'm proud of this – of him. John has only one problem: he doesn't speak Russian. But I speak Russian. And we cooperate. I'm a part of this. I'm his personal translator now.

BR: So how is life in Madison?

SD: I'm lucky John is from Madison. Because Madison is just ... when I came there I felt like I was home. It's peaceful. At first, when we went to the grocery store or shopping or a restaurant, everybody smiled, everybody said hello. And I kept asking "John, who is this?" And he would say, "Who knows?" People just enjoy each other. People just say hello and smile and you know, it's like, oh, boy. Nobody does this in Kazakhstan. In Madison, people - their heart is different. I feel special there. It's home. It's home.

I love Madison. My children, we are lucky. It's easy to have children there. It's easy to have a life there. This year I went with John on some business trips. I was in San Francisco, Washington DC, Baltimore, New York, Chicago, Milwaukee. But I'm so happy I live in Madison. Exactly Madison. It's the best. It's the best place to live. I'm lucky to be there.