

Russian Charm Woven at Old Country Tailor

by A.C. Neumann

A bright blue banner sprouting spring flowers and the word "ALTERATIONS" flaps merrily above the Old Country Tailor at the corner of Folsom Boulevard and 52nd Street. Nestled between Mad Dog Bakery and Johnny's Barber Shop, this new shop in East Sacramento greets the customer with a rare old world craft and provincial charm. Each morning, the owner, Vera Samusenko, opens her door wide to hang her cheery banner in the breeze and to welcome in the sunshine — perhaps not of a rainy spring — but of the American way of life as lived in East Sacramento.

An immigrant from Russia, Vera Samusenko came to this country four years ago with the dream of a life better than that of her desperately impoverished and oppressed homeland. But unlike many others, she came to this country willing to work for her dreams.

Vera and her husband knew no English when they arrived in New York and needed welfare to provide for their three young children and her ailing parents. Unhappy with this plight, she determined to struggle for financial independence and a sense of self-respect. Plunged into a new country, a new culture, a new language, and a new kind of poverty, she nevertheless clung to her strong Christian faith, practiced surreptitiously in the communist Soviet Union. She believed that her God who landed her on the soil of freedom would not forsake her.

Vera and her family attended First Baptist Church in Midtown where she met a member who was also a local dress designer.

With a loan from the church and promises of work, Vera bought a sewing machine and began sewing children's dresses at home, earning between \$2 to \$5 per dress and often sewing up to 700 dresses in a 10-day stretch. Her husband worked odd jobs as his health allowed, building cabinets and repairing cars.

Within a year and a half, Vera was able to finally earn enough from her dressmaking to cut loose from welfare. But the work was seasonal, often trickling to nothing for weeks on end. Further dependence on welfare loomed as a real possibility. At the same time, however, the season's peak would find Vera sewing 18 hours a day without rest, day after day, with no time to sleep, eat, or even hug her children. "I had to do something," she says. "I couldn't live all the time like this. It was no life."

Vera spent more than a year learning the ins and outs of business from the Greater Sacramento Small Business Development Center, which offers free assistance to entrepreneurs. She developed a business plan, researched the market, and explored several possible locations. She kept finding herself drawn to East Sacramento with its friendly, established neighborhoods tucked around busily traveled Folsom Boulevard. The phone call of a friend alerted her to a vacant space on the bustling corner of Folsom and 52nd. James and Gwyn Campbell, the owners of the property, encouraged her business dreams and leased her the space in the quaint brick building.

With the generous help of a private loan, Vera opened Old Country Tailor in East Sacramento on March 4. The shop is



Vera Samusenko

equipped with seven types of sewing machines and a large cutting table (which previously sat in Vera's living room), and spans out into a large workroom. Vera's husband deserves the credit for the gently curved counters, solid dressing rooms, and mirrored platform, and Zoya, who once designed for Russian aristocracy, the credit for the elegant window and dressing room curtains.

While the shop features alterations, dressmaking, and custom design for men, women, and children, Vera and her Russian workers have cut and sewn drapes, stuffed and fringed pillows, repaired broken purse straps, and replaced sleeping bag zippers. "We can do anything," Vera laughs, holding up a baseball cap that needs a patch sewn on. And indeed, they can — and do it well, too. Vera takes great pride in her work, her attention to detail, and her expert touches.

"One woman brought us a very, very old dress, very delicate and beautiful, but torn in many, many places. We spent hours sewing every hole, but you cannot even find them anymore," she says, pleased. "And this woman — she says she will bring us many more customers, she is happy."

The shop also sells handmade, custom

designed children's clothes, either off the rack or special ordered. Displayed in the window is a carefree sunflowery dress skirted with ruffles and topped by a sunflower-decked hat — a steal at only \$38. A bolt of this fabric lies beneath the cutting table for any orders that come in. Vera encourages customers to bring their own fabric and patterns, but offers a small selection of her own fabric. She is also able to make patterns based sketches or pictures cut from magazines.

Of her customers, Vera has only praise. "Americans smile so much," she says, "not like in Russia where we were afraid of each other." But she still feels embarrassed at the mistakes she makes in English, once offering to smooth out the "shrinkles" of a customer's coat, another time tapering the wedding jacket of the "broom."

Vera still spends long days at her sewing machine, still doesn't hug her children as much as she'd like, and spends her one day off on Sunday at church and then catching up on sleep. But she is grateful for the opportunity to work for her dream. She knows that her God has not forsaken her.



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