

Hothoused in Russia, educated in Britain



Rita Avdeev, who goes to school in Hertfordshire John Angerson

Sally Williams

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Sally Williams meets the children of the Moscow elite who are now studying at the top independent schools in the UK

In a London studio, about 1,550 miles from his home in Moscow, Oleg Sergienko, 11, lists what he knows about Britain: King Arthur, the Queen, Harry Potter. Oleg, a handsome boy with sleek hair and brown eyes still smarting from jet lag – only yesterday he was waving goodbye to his mother at the airport – says he knows every detail of *Harry Potter*. So it is with a certain excitement that he is going to school in the part of the world where Harry Potter comes from.

Tomorrow Oleg is to start at Windlesham House School, the pre-prep and prep school in Pulborough, West Sussex. “He knows there will be no magic,” says his father, Nikita, who is high-cheekboned, young-looking and frank about Oleg’s main difficulty. “He understands most English, if you speak slowly, but he can’t express himself very well.”

Still, from Oleg’s point of view, almost everything about Windlesham House – dormitories, house parents (Oleg is in Dragon House), rugby tournaments, 60 acres of countryside – is impossibly exotic compared with Promo One, his school back in Moscow.

It’s certainly a world away from Nikita Sergienko’s own childhood. The son of an IT specialist – “a dead-end profession in Soviet times” – he joined the State Bank of the USSR as an accountant after leaving Moscow State University. “In 1986, accounting was a shameful career for a man,” he says. “Only women did accounting.”

But then came the tumultuous privatisation of markets that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. “I started to have a very great career immediately,” he says.

Sergienko is now a chief financial officer with a multinational company, is married to the daughter of a family of former high-ranking KGB officials – although “nowadays this all means nothing” – and has a “global lifestyle”. His company head offices are in Riga in Latvia and Vilnius in Lithuania; he commutes to Paris, Amsterdam, London and New York.

His family – Oleg is the oldest of four children – stay in Moscow (“I try to be there every weekend”). They holiday in foreign resorts. The family has just returned from a fortnight in Goa, where, ever ambitious for his son, Sergienko made Oleg run a half-marathon. “I am building up his muscles,” he says. “He can do 50 push-ups. Five zero!”

His aim had always been for Oleg to go to a British boarding school. “The education in England is better than in Russia. And Russia is now part of a global system and you have to compete globally.” After years of saying no, Sergienko’s wife finally agreed.

Britain’s private schools are attracting an increasing number of pupils from around the world. Russians are the fastest-growing national group at British private schools, according to the Independent Schools Council. Last year, the number of pupils from Russia increased by 27.4 per cent, from Nigeria by 16.3 per cent and China by 5.45 per cent.

There are now nearly 26,000 international students at UK independent schools (about 5 per cent of children), according to the 2012-13 Independent Schools Council annual census. More than half of the girls at Roedean, the quintessentially British girls’ boarding school on the South Coast, come from abroad.

Katie Chow, 15, an only child from Hong Kong, where her father is a businessman and mother an office manager, is to start at Cheltenham Ladies’ College in September. What, I ask over the phone, are you most looking forward to? “Meeting people from different countries,” she replies. “For example, I have never met anyone from Russia.”

At Katie’s school in Hong Kong there are only two foreign students (on an exchange from Germany) out of 1,000 pupils. Roughly one third of pupils at Cheltenham have an overseas address (this includes British girls whose parents are living or working overseas).

“Your education system is one of your best exports,” says Shannon Holden, an American who works for an arts foundation in Dubai. “And it’s great to be able to partake of that.” Her son, David, 19, has just left Harrow.

Appealing factors are quality – there is a lack of rote learning in our schools and more critical and creative thinking – and social cachet: parents associate the historic buildings with establishment privilege and a full diary of future contacts. English is the lingua franca of the world.

This increased demand for places has had an interesting consequence: businesses that help foreigners gain admission to UK schools are booming. “When I started tutoring in 1992 there must have been 30 or 40 people tutoring in London. Now there are thousands,” says Charles Bonas, the tweedy founder of Bonas MacFarlane Education, a tutoring company. Its headquarters is in an extremely new and chic office by the Thames in southwest London.

With Harrow and Oxford credentials, Bonas started tutoring as a sideline while at law school. “I got so taken with tutoring that I pursued it as a career,” he says. Back then, his work consisted mainly of live-in positions with British aristocratic families (like, he points out, Paul Pennyfeather, the tutor in Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall*). His CV also includes helping to get the first Chinese boy into Eton in 2000, and the second Chinese boy into Harrow.

Bonas MacFarlane now has 530 tutors (most of them products of the British independent system), four staff in Dubai, three in Kazakhstan and two in Moscow, and sends British tutors to about 30 countries, including Russia, Dubai, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and India, where they are engaged by households that have the means to chase after places costing up to £33,000 a year. Only half of Bonas MacFarlane’s families are British. “We don’t work with many oligarchs. We have probably 20 billionaire families,” says Bonas.

Prices for coaching vary. A one-hour class with an Oxbridge graduate from Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants costs £58. Live-in tutors can charge anything from £30,000 pro rata, plus living accommodation.

“The highest we’ve charged is £60,000: that was sending someone from Eton with an Oxford degree in history to Moscow for a year, to prepare a boy for the 13-plus,” says William Stadlen, director and lead consultant at Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants. Charles Bonas charges up to £500 an hour.

“Inquiries from overseas parents are rising. I had none a few years ago,” reports Dee Francken, the former head of junior school at North London Collegiate School and now a convivial “educational consultant” based in London. “British secondary education is seen as the gold standard. Then the ambitious parent wants Harvard, Princeton, Yale – that’s the mindset I’ve come across.”

Recent clients include Dmitry Avdeev, 40, a former investment banker, now working for a Russian-owned energy group, whose daughter Rita, 11, has just started at Queenswood School, an independent girls’ boarding school near Potters Bar in Hertfordshire.

“I never managed to fully understand it,” says Avdeev, of the opaque British independent system. “It’s very important to have people who have prior knowledge of British education, which is convoluted and complex and not easy for someone who has never lived in Britain.”

Rita’s English and essay-writing technique were honed for the entrance exam by a live-out British tutor in Moscow (for four hours a week over two months), while Francken advised on schools and monitored the tutor. “I can tell if a tutor is doing the business or not, and often they’re not. It’s a totally unregulated industry,” she says.

“The best thing about English schools is there are no parents and I will have lessons in English. I am very excited about that,” says Rita, surveying Queenswood’s polished oak floors, leaded windows and open vista over 120 acres of land (and 27 tennis courts).

To expose Rita to all the winds that sweep over England, Queenswood has hit upon the idea of having an international department that teaches “cultural referencing” – in other words, the significance of *The X Factor* and the meaning of “It’s raining cats and dogs.”

Bonas MacFarlane also offers “immersion courses” in British culture, where children stay at a boarding school or live with a British family for a month during the summer (at a cost of £400 to £500 a day). “In many of these families the money is new,” Bonas explains. “They’ve grown up in cities, live in apartments and then they get to a British boarding school and the upper middle-class children at some of these boarding schools have never been to a shopping mall, never been to Dubai.

“They don’t go on holiday to St Tropez; they don’t wear new, branded clothes. They go riding, play in tennis tournaments, live in country houses, which are beautiful, but don’t have much hot water. In China, the idea of going to the countryside is completely alien, so there’s a lot of cultural integration we try to achieve.”

“I am now back and it’s very white, beautiful, and literally sparkling (pollution?),” Tamara Colchester, 28, writes via e-mail from Moscow. A graduate from the University of East Anglia, where she studied English and creative writing, Colchester has been tutoring Alina, the 11-year-old daughter of a Russian banker, since September (with a two-week holiday back home for Christmas) and returned in January for another three-month stint.

A writer, she started tutoring two years ago after hearing about it through a friend, who is also a writer. “She said it’s a great way to supplement your income,” says Colchester. This is her first position overseas.

In two years Alina will take her 13-plus entrance exam for an English boarding school – exactly which school is still being debated – and her parents’ wish is that she will be fluent in English “so she can be up against English children trying to get into these super-competitive schools”, says Colchester.

She is paid £800 a week plus living expenses – “I made a stipulation that I wanted my own apartment.” Alina gets up at 7am and goes to school. She is collected by Colchester and her Georgian driver at 1 or 2pm, depending on the day. “We are driven absolutely everywhere,” says Colchester.

They then drive for an hour across the city to an enormous Olympic-sized gymnasium where Alina trains for three hours in gymnastics. Here, Colchester’s job is to wait outside. The drive home takes another hour. Alina eats her food very quickly before a 90-minute session with her Russian tutor, who coaches in Russian language, maths and science. (Alina has four staff: a nanny, art tutor, Russian tutor and English tutor.)

Then at 8pm, Colchester has about an hour with her. “Alina is working from the moment she gets up until about 10 or 11 at night. I go to their *dacha*, a country house an hour out of the city, on Saturday and tutor her for three hours every Sunday morning.”

Colchester tutors for a total of eight hours a week, discussing sentence structure, grammar and the motivation of Piggy (*Lord of the Flies* is rarely found in Russian schools). “Alina knows quite a bit about London, having gone there on holidays and for shopping trips.” Colchester spends the rest of her working day “waiting”.

“Being paid to do nothing sounds great, but it’s difficult in its own way,” she says. “Having a project of my own is important.” She is free to do what she likes after work, “as long as I arrive on time. It’s very much a fashionable thing, to have an English girl on your staff.” Other full-time staff include the housekeeper and two girls from the Philippines. “They like to introduce you to their friends.

“It’s very human to want the best for your children, and the mother in particular is incredibly ambitious for her daughter. They are very open about it. It’s an opportunity that they didn’t have. They are global. The world is truly theirs in that they go everywhere. They can get their visas. They can choose. They say it’s a dream, but it’s a reality for them. They know they will do this [send Alina to a boarding school] because they can afford it.”

Katie Chow wanted to go to a British boarding school because “they are really famous in the world and really nourishing”. The prospect of historic buildings, enhanced social networks and people-free space (something Hong Kong, with its population of seven million, cannot provide) is thrilling. “Maybe a turning point in my life,” she says.

Katie applied to four schools last summer and sat the entrance exams, for which she was coached by British tutors, in November at her school in Hong Kong. Not that she ever met them. “E-tutoring” is the brainchild of Bridgepoint Tutors (created by ARCH Education and Keystone Tutors). The idea is that tutors in Britain coach students in Hong Kong via the internet.

Working from computers nearly 6,000 miles apart, Katie and her teachers link up via Skype. She has two hours of online tutoring a week (at a cost of between £94 and £118) and has an “e-tutor” for economics and another for geography (she plans to

study A levels in economics, geography, maths, government and politics).

“My economics tutor works in the UK Parliament so he really teaches me a lot about the UK,” she says. “You can read about it in Wikipedia. You can google it. But only somebody who knows the system can get the right information in your head.”

But it doesn't always work out. Charlie Saunders, 26, was paid £1,000 a week to live with a family in Kazakhstan and coach a ten-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl for St Paul's School and Francis Holland School in London. Their father was a high-powered executive, who wore bespoke Prada suits and had 15 bodyguards.

When Saunders arrived at the “compound” (the kind of family he worked for didn't live in a house), his first impression was that it was the most affluent place he'd ever seen. Each child had two nannies and a typical outfit for the little girl was a Gucci coat and Dior boots. “There was a birthday feast for the son unlike anything I'd ever seen,” he says. “It was like everyone was dressed up to go to the Oscars and there was an unbelievable ten-course meal – caviar, lobster, scallops, a whole roasted ox, a whole roasted pig.

“I had three months to get them ready for exams, which were incredibly difficult, so I was working them pretty hard, tutoring them after school from 5 until 9. The girl didn't enjoy it at all. She hated the idea of going to London, hated the idea of changing schools.

“It was a very abusive environment and it came to a head in the Caribbean. We had a month there over Christmas. I was tutoring them nine, ten hours a day. When they were allowed time off, they had to be with their mum at the champagne bar, as trophy children.

“On the outside you are living in paradise and yet you are working 12 hours a day, forcing these kids to do maths paper after maths paper, having their mum swear and shout at them.”

Saunders had been with them for four months when the family came to London for a holiday. He decided to leave. “It was eye-opening, a complete insight into a different world. But I couldn't cope with the pressure.”

I meet William Stadlen, director and lead consultant at Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants, in the study of his Georgian house in Notting Hill Gate, West London. Still only 32, he has a staff of 12 in a semi-industrial business unit near by (and four in Dubai). “But this is a more conducive location for conversation,” he says.

The room is adorned with a desk, thick carpet and plenty of books. Stadlen's taste is old-school, as is his education – St Paul's and Oxford (where he read English). He set up Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants ten years ago. He's just back from Kiev. “Russia and the former Soviet states constitute 25 to 30 per cent of our clients,” he says.

Seventy per cent of his business is with foreign-born families. “One of our idiosyncrasies is our class system. They love it. They all want to be little English gentlemen. That is why they want to invest in Eton.”

Let's say I live in Azerbaijan, have a six-year-old son and want him to go to Eton (from 13 to 18). What do I do? “You've probably left it a bit too late,” he replies. “You've got to register a little earlier.” I check with Eton. “Applicants have to be registered by the age of 10½; there is no priority before that time,” writes the director of admissions via e-mail.

But Stadlen's point is that, “You need to be in a preparatory school that has a track record of getting children into Eton.” In fact, you need to be in the pre-prep that feeds the prep that gets the children into Eton. “It is a stream, and from the pupil's perspective, you want to be getting on those right tracks and staying on them, all the way through,” he says.

In the past Eton didn't have its own marketing department or admissions office. Recruitment was done via housemasters and the Common Entrance exam at 13. What's changed is the introduction in 2001 of the “pre-test”, a make-or-break exam at the age of 11 (boys still have to pass the Common Entrance) that other schools, such as Harrow, have gone on to adopt. And this is the exam that has galvanised the tutoring world.

Competition, particularly for London schools, is “incredibly stiff”, says Stadlen, and made more intense by the influx of foreign nationals. “We have very good schools, so there's a lot of competition. A big bottleneck.”

The upshot, of course, is children faltering under pressure. “Over the past 18 months I've worked with 150 children and a third of those are foreign-born students,” says Gary Leboff, a performance psychologist recruited by Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants in 2012 to help to alleviate children's (and their parents') anxiety.

With a background in sports psychology – his clients include Premier League footballers such as Peter Crouch and Jermain Defoe – Leboff works on the very specific skill of “being able to perform in the moment under huge amounts of pressure”.

Employed by families for three to six sessions, Leboff treats children as young as 6. “It's a discussion I have with Holland Park about whether we should be working with six-year-olds,” he admits. He says it can be especially hard for foreign-born students because “they are pitched into schools where they know no one. It can be very frightening.”

Leboff's appeal is two-fold. He can be brought in to deal with poor performance and such "stress indicators" as sleeplessness and low self-esteem. "Or parents can simply want to give their kid a leg up over other kids," he says. "Far from being a problem, it's a way of getting ahead of everybody else, frankly."

So what is the effect of this inflated competition? Are British children being pushed out? "I can tell you that the director of admissions at Eton gets letters on his desk every day from enraged old boys asking why their son didn't get a place," says one insider.

"I'm sure there are cases where English parents are squeezed," agrees Woody Webster, co-founder of the tutors Bright Young Things. "But at the same time, many other schools are filling gaps that hitherto would have been empty." The fee income from international students for 2012-13 was about £685 million, according to the Independent Schools Council.

One thing is certain: foreign-born students are here to stay. "They're changing the face of UK independent education for ever," Stadlen concludes. "But it feels appropriate. If you talk to UK Trade & Investment [the government department working with UK businesses to help them succeed in international markets], they will tell you we have two key exports: pharmaceuticals and education.

"It feels right that, in an increasingly globalised world, one of our remaining industries is finally opening up to the rest of the world."