

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!

Christopher Silvester meets Irina Shumovitch, who's helping to open the doors of England's top public schools to a generation of bright young Russians

It is not snobbery that drives so many wealthy Russians to send their children to English public schools, insists Irina Shumovitch, founder of the Russian School Placement Service, so much as a desire to inculcate those children with different educational values. 'Having experienced three educational systems — Russian, French and English — I believe that the English school education is the best, most individual and creative,' she says. 'This conviction makes it easy for me to persuade the clients that they can't find better schools for unleashing their child's creative potential than here in the UK.'

Shumovitch, who was born in Lenin-grad (as it was then known) in the early Sixties, has lived in London since 1983, where she taught at St Paul's Girls School and later lectured in Russian at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster), before joining the BBC World Service as a producer for its Russian Service.

Although her school placement service is relatively new, Shumovitch has been providing service solutions to her fellow Russians for many years. 'It started when Gorbachev came to power and *perestroika* started happening. My childhood friends were coming to London in the early Nineties and they wanted to know which hotels and restaurants to book and how to book skiing holidays in Europe. I was effectively running a private concierge service for my friends. Education for their children came a little bit later.

'They liked the imposing buildings and rolling lawns of Wellington College or Stowe. People started asking me for recommendations of schools and how to apply.'

The problem with the Russian education system, Shumovitch believes, is that, like the French system, it is too academic and incredibly rigid. 'It is based on knowing the right answer. Children are given information and conclusions and concepts and dates and names of leaders. They have to learn all the information by heart and then they are tested on their knowledge in exams. It discourages them from thinking for themselves. That kind of system is good for sci-

entific subjects, maths or physics. The problem all Russian children have is that they are not very good at writing essays or going to interviews, at showing their personality.'

Shumovitch left the BBC in 2003 and went to live in France, working for a TV company called Euronews. 'When I came back from Lyon in 2007, I needed to do something. A lot of my childhood friends had become fabulously rich in St Petersburg, so the first enquiries came from them.'

People find out about her service through friends. 'I do have a website, but mostly it's people who know me from St Petersburg or Moscow,' she says. She also writes a blog for

Russia about British education. Nobody ever finds her through the site, although it gives her credibility. Instead, she finds that personal introductions are much more effective.

'It's a bespoke service,' she explains, 'and it's very flexible. I meet with one of the parents, usually the mother. We discuss what she wants, what she expects, the educational level of the child, what subjects they are good at, and what she's trying to get out of it. The next stage is seeing the child, assessing their academic level, and visiting a school.'

Shumovitch works with a London tutoring group, Bonas Macfarlane, which provides preparation for entry to most public schools. 'I recently sent two tutors to Moscow for a year who have eight A grades at A-level, have just graduated from Oxford and have been teaching Russian in a city in Siberia, so they're Russian-speaking as well. Also, Bonas Macfarlane help with interviewing techniques, which is very useful because the culture in Russia to this day is a little bit like Victorian England, where children are seen but not heard. Many of the children don't know how to shake hands, they don't look into your eyes, and they don't participate in conversations.' A tutor, sometimes an ex-actor, will school the children in how best to present themselves.

Sometimes Shumovitch will visit a school with the parent, but for the most part she leaves that side of things to her Ukrainian partner, Victoria, who is a violin teacher at Eton College. 'I maintain the website, handle the PR and meet

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the clients, but when it comes to visiting the schools and assessing their academic level, Victoria does that.' The Russian School Placement Service charges a certain sum for the consultation — not for the initial meeting, but once they receive the necessary paperwork, including the child's academic results, they try to match the child's academic level to the school and they fill in the application. 'This charge is set against the final fee,' says Shumovitch. 'Then we charge 30 per cent when the application is accepted, another 40 per cent when the child gets to the interview, and the remainder when the child is accepted.'

Of the public schools themselves, she cites Stowe as being especially welcoming for Russians, but she also mentions Charterhouse, Wellington College and Shrewsbury. Most of the children she places are around twelve or thirteen, though she has placed some younger kids at prep schools. Some come here at eleven and sit the Common Entrance exam; others come at the age of thirteen and do an entrance test tailored for foreign students, which tests them in English and maths and includes an interview.

'The public schools are eager for the business,' she admits. 'They know that Russians are quite good students. There are now so many Russian kids in public schools in this country,

they are totally accepted. It's easier for some kids to integrate than others. Some will find it difficult to follow the rules. They have been brought up in a society where their parents are privileged, they know that anything can be bought, that there are always exceptions to the rules. But there are plenty of kids who find it easier, usually those with parents who are more caring and nurturing — they integrate very easily and love being in the school.'

Apart from wanting the business, Shumovitch believes that educating the children of the Russian elite in English boarding schools and introducing them to different values will eventually contribute to European stability.

'When they grow up and take leading positions in Russia's political and financial worlds, they will have the language, the manners and the contacts, and feel more at ease with their Western colleagues than their parents ever have. The greater the knowledge, the greater the closeness. They won't have the insecurity and the sense of misunderstanding that have been causing a great deal of hostility towards the West in Russia.

'And one little detail — the son of a well-known Russian oligarch, when he goes back to his boarding school after the holidays, puts away his Vertu telephone and takes with him an old Nokia. Clearly, he's learned something!' *J*