

THE NEWSPAPER FOUNDER

NATASHA CHOUVAEVA

Growing up under communism in the bleak, closed city of Gorki, Chouvaeva dreamt of finding a better life in Britain. "I came from a working-class background, but I had learnt to speak English fluently and couldn't wait to get out."

As soon as she and her husband arrived in 1991, she found translating work while he got a job with a Ukrainian bank. "Everything was strange to us at first, but we never doubted our decision. By saving every penny, we were able in 1994 to launch the first newspaper for what was becoming

a well-established, wealthy, Russian-speaking community."

Quietly proud of her roots and heritage, Chouvaeva, 37, is worried that her eight-year-old daughter, Marie, is falling behind with her Russian: "We don't want her to turn her back on our former country."

Although Chouvaeva has never returned to Gorki, her parents have visited her Hertfordshire home – palatial by ordinary Russian standards. "They still find it hard to understand why I've made my life here, so I had to explain that it would have been impossible to do what I've achieved back in Russia."



Pacific island of Vanuatu was briefly popular. According to Whitehall sources, Russians applying to settle in Britain are now subjected to far more stringent background checks than was previously the case. "I was basically told, you'll be on the next plane home if you ever step out of line over here," one recent applicant remembers. Boris Berezovsky boasts that "nobody has ever been checked out as thoroughly as me"; though when his Mercedes was stolen last summer, a spokesman warned whoever was responsible about the risk of mistaken identity, claiming that "Boris lives under constant death threats".

Forget Berezovsky, he's history, says Aliona Murchinskaya of Red Square: the shady oligarchs and gold-toothed wide boys of the Yeltsin era have given way to a far more worldly and sophisticated breed of Russians. Conspicuous excess is out, she insists. "In Moscow you expect friends to ask how much a new jacket or bag cost, but over here the trend is towards typically British understatement." One wealthy banker is said to have considered hanging his Chagall in the lavatory to avoid being thought ostentatious.

So was an outbreak of good taste behind the abrupt cancellation of two heavily publicised concerts in London and Manchester by Murchinskaya's clients Tata, who trade on their steamy lesbian image? "I'm sure they would have thrilled the fans," she says demurely, "but it was quite impossible for us to accept their management's demand for 300 girls under the age of 16 to back them up wearing school uniforms."

Surveying the early diners at her London restaurant, Potemkin, Elena Getman explains why she gave up a flourishing career organising Anglo-Russian business conferences to provide a grateful clientele with such back-home fare as borscht, blinis, pickled herrings and Siberian pork dumplings. "We Russians love to impress other people, especially the British, and I wanted to open a classy place where you could take friends or clients without a drunk falling into your soup. My Russian guests are mostly highly paid

professionals, working in finance or the oil and natural-gas business. They know how to behave in public – though that never stops them having a good time." Potemkin's growing band of regulars think nothing of spending £100 per head on dinner, Getman observes, "and most of that goes on vodka". On special occasions, the Jewel of Russia is passed around at £280 a bottle.

Getman recalls a 19-year-old Russian who enjoyed standing lavish rounds of drink on his father's credit card. "Then one day he came in with a distinguished-looking older gentleman, and I was just about to set up the vodkas when he muttered in English, 'Elena, that's



HE IS CHARGED WITH FRAUD, FORGERY, TAX EVASION AND EMBEZZLEMENT

Mikhail Khodorkovsky, now in a Russian jail

my dad, please don't mention the bar bills."

In December the Russian public's visceral dislike of the oligarchs found full expression in crushing victory of Putin's party in parliamentary elections. The resurgence of ultra-nationalist, anti-semitic politics saw one of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's closest business associates, the Jewish billionaire Alexander Lebedev, collect a humiliating 12% of the vote in the contest for mayor of Moscow. Putin is now considered certain to secure another presidential term.

If that worries Abramovich, he conceals it well as he awaits the prosecutors' decision on whether to charge him. Perhaps Chelsea's reform sustains him – he reportedly spent £800 to bring some 500 guests to watch their triumph over Manchester United. Or perhaps he has forgotten the response he gave when asked what would be his advice to a thrusting young entrepreneur making his way in Russia today: "Do not think that you will never go to jail."

It is still unclear whether Abramovich will eventually face charges in Russia. Despite being the governor of a remote Siberian province, he has always shunned the political limelight, some observers believe he remains close to Putin. In any case, he has been cashing up in a big way: his holdings in Russia, although the Yukos deal has now fallen through, he pocketed an estimated £2 billion from selling his stake in the privatised aluminium industry. "Roman's always singing praises of Britain as a place to settle, educate the kids, spend more quality time at home," another insider points out, "so how surprising would it be if he decides that Russian oligarchs are becoming an endangered species and gets out while he can?"

The future looks less rosy for Khodorkovsky who has repeatedly been denied bail and, one senior judicial official hints, may have to wait for up to two years before standing trial. One Kremlin-watcher thinks that Putin may eventually dispatch him into permanent exile. Another disagrees: "The nation wants the president to start skinning the fat cats." ■