

From the Royal School in London to the home schooling in the Alps.

It is difficult to imagine that you, on your own initiative, remove your children from the school where they study with the heirs of the British Crown, and you yourself sometimes meet their parents - Prince William and Kate. However, 2020 showed that anything can happen, including a situation when a successful mother of two children suddenly realizes that in her life, in her family, in herself, as a parent, something very significant and important has formed - something that no longer fits into the established framework of everyday life and the school curriculum, even as polished for decades as in Thomas's Battersea. And this awareness gives impetus to decisive actions, in which responsibility for oneself and for one's children is considered in a new way. We talked with the banker and entrepreneur Olga Vysokova about the alternative to the royal education she chose for her children and how she coped with unexpected difficulties, which, it seemed, should not have arisen in a new place.

Olga, just before the next wave of the epidemic, you and your children left for Switzerland. Then no one knew about the closure of schools and a hard lockdown. What were the reasons for your decision?

I do not want to pretend to be an oracle, I also did not know that there would be a second lockdown. I only had a strong inner feeling that I needed to leave the big city, that this pandemic problem would not go away so quickly and life would not return back to normal for a long time to come. I am an optimist in life, but sometimes you have to be realistic. After the first lockdown, it became clear that something needed to be changed in our life, so as not to recall this period later as a strong family trauma (when the whole family is within four walls from morning to evening, parents groan from online education of children and then all will remember this as a disaster). Therefore, at the beginning of September, I gave our school a notice that I was withdrawing my children (son 12, daughter 10) at the end of the term. The school sympathized with me, but told me to go home, calm down, rest and come back in 2 weeks if I did not change my mind. I have not changed my mind. They looked at me in bewilderment.

How did you decide to take your children from one of the best schools in London and put them on home schooling? How did you manage this?

For 8 years at Thomas's Battersea, I got used to the fact that the school does not always understand me and my approach. For them, I do not fit into the framework neither family or social (because I am single mum, they have never seen the dad, while I am a very active mother and I pay myself for the expensive school).

Our school is really special - every morning I was happy to see the smile of Prince William, who was bringing his children to school and always stayed for morning coffee in the dining room. Often at school meetings, I sat next to the elegant Kate (she is elegant even in a little tennis dress), because their children George and Charlotte are at our school.

Of course, the decision was not easy, but I came to it gradually. Last spring, I organized a series of webinars with the best Russian-speaking education and psychology specialists in London: Yulia Morozova, Yulia Kosko, Natalia Rice, Elena Moore, Elena Naydenova. These meetings took place within the framework of my social project Women Who Inspire. This is a project for women, who motivate the others even in difficult times. Then I came to the conclusion that I want my children to be extraordinary personalities, agile and adaptive to any situation in life, therefore, their education should be comprehensive. And I organized it myself!

It seems impossible to replace the teachers, who educate the royal family. Do you think you did it?

As a child, I dreamed of becoming a teacher of the Russian language and literature, but I became a banker. This year I was able to realize my dream through my children. I am the headmaster of a home school. We have 26 lessons per week, we study 6 days a week in the morning. In the afternoon - sports: skiing and sledging every day until dark! My children are very different, so their lessons and teachers are different. Every child needs a special approach, so I carefully selected those who would teach them. In addition to compulsory English, Math, English history, physics, chemistry, biology, we study the history of Russia with a teacher from the Moscow State University, biology and chemistry - with a teacher from Novossibirsk State University. Physics is taught to my son by a guy from the CERN laboratory in Geneva. All English teachers are Oxford University graduates. I teach French to children myself twice a week (I learned it at MGIMO). My daughter also has a Russian vocal training (2 times a week), and we continue her favourite gymnastics online. I see that English and Russian teachers have very different approaches to teaching. The British tutors prepare specifically for the exam, carefully analyse all the questions, while Russian teachers slide across all sciences, drawing a bigger picture of the world and identifying correlations. I like that my children study in three languages without problems, they have no stigma and they adapt to different requirements easily. Flexibility of thinking and acting is one of the most important skills that I would like to develop in my children. They must be knowledgeable and open to a world of possibilities, within a wide radius of London!

How did your son and daughter react to your decision?

Children were great! They appreciated this chance, that I gave them. They love their lessons and they understand that this is not for the check, not for the attendance report - this is for their knowledge and for life. Therefore, there are homework assignments. It's quite a lot of work and this is not always happy, especially when the legs fall off after skiing. But there is no one to hide behind, they need to answer to the teacher, who will not leave the situation without consequences if the child does not study on his own. We work for results, not for evaluation. Children say they have learned much more in that short time, than they would in school. It made me think: now I spend exactly half of the amount I was paying for the school, and children have more knowledge and more time for their hobbies and family! School was taking nine hours a day and filled the child's entire life. Was it right?

Wasn't it scary to be alone in the mountains with two children?

Switzerland remained an old dream of my youth, when I left it to build my life in London. I have left a lot of dear things to my soul and heart in this country. Also, I wanted the children to improve their French. Over the years at school, their level of French has not moved from beginners, so the choice fell on the French part of Switzerland. Initially, I had big plans: my family, friends, my partner were to come to me, but everything was cut short by another lockdown, and I was left alone, even for my birthday.

Why did you decide to stay? How do you adapt in isolation?

Our stay here is an adventure, a challenge, a test of strength, both physical and mental. I did not expect that in Switzerland the life would be so expensive and difficult. Since we live on the top of the mountain, I have to go to the supermarket down to the village. There is no

delivery - not food, not meals from the restaurants. I have to carry all the heavy stuff upstairs, including firewood for the chimney. The situation was aggravated by snow storms and heavy frosts, which did not stop since the beginning of January. Then I got very scared for the children - that I would not be able to protect and feed them. Avalanches blocked the roads, buses and cars got stuck. Then the Internet crashed and our work was interrupted. Yes, I am here all alone!

I do not want to hide that it is hard for me and I am very tired. I am real and I want to motivate and give strength to other people by showing my true example. If I do not share the difficulties and fatigue, then no one will believe me, because without this – life is impossible! Glamorous life in photos on social networks is a deception, that does not teach or motivate us! I speak truthfully about my feelings, as they can resonate with yours. Yes, we all get tired, and life sometimes tests us, but they must be endured. *You never know what you are capable of until you go through the difficulties.* I am glad that I turned out to be strong, did not chicken out in the face of difficulties and did not turn back and that I have such amazing children on whom I can rely completely. I like the feeling that I am independent and I can do everything myself. I am glad that I gained this power!

Do you have time for yourself?

Of course, I have a lot of responsibilities: from buying groceries, cooking 3 times a day and constantly cleaning to doing my work. I am currently working on a very complex financial transaction: all decisions need to be discussed promptly and carefully prepared. It takes time and nerves. Hence, probably, my fatigue, because children also require undivided attention. In addition, I have 2 social projects: **Women Who Inspire** - a community for the female entrepreneurs, where I am currently developing a new strategy and **Global Next Gen Community** - a community for young leaders. Last month, I applied to the University of Oxford for an MSc in Sustainability. I think it is important for children to see that their mum is working, she can be serious, and mum is also writing essays (children hate them), but this is life and you need to work hard to live well! It seems to me that I never worked so hard at the beginning of the year as I do now. Lockdown and a break from all the entertainment has freed up so much time for work! Why not take the advantage of this?

When are you planning to return to London?

It's hard to say yet. I have not yet completed this path of the new knowledge.

After quarantine, will you leave your children home schooled? Would they like to go back to school?

Good question! We had planned originally to return to school for the summer term, but the places are not guaranteed. So, this option is questionable. But, looking at the result of the new experience, I'm not sure that I want to send my extraordinary, strong and free thinking children even to the best London school.

In what ways has your quarantined life improved? Is there something for which you are grateful to the quarantine?

I am grateful that I had such a unique opportunity to spend long, quality time with my children - this is an invaluable investment in life. I am with children 24/7 - I do not leave them with anyone. We talk a lot and discuss a variety of topics: from economics and world

history to Aesop's fables. I don't waste time on unnecessary shopping, useless meetings, restaurants, attributes of a fictitious life. I don't like watching TV shows, but I enjoy watching good films and reading books - this is happiness for me! I keep in touch with a lot of friends and restore some old contacts.

It seems to me that I have become more attentive, thoughtful and balanced. And most importantly, I became stronger both mentally and physically. I got a dizzying sense of independence - the most valuable thing in a person's life.

Marianna Modenova