

HEALTH AND SAFETY

A ROMANTIC IDEA OF
HEALTHCARE PLAYED A BIG PART
IN KARINE SOLLOWAY'S DECISION
TO RUN MEDICAL ENTERPRISES
FOR RUSSIAN EXPATS IN THE UK.
SOPHIA CHARALAMBOUS
FINDS OUT MORE



Karine Solloway was born in the Russian city of Kislovodsk, once a thriving spa town, with freshwater springs and health farms visited by people from across the country.

"Kislovodsk translates as sour waters," she tells me on the rooftop terrace of number 16 Devonshire Street where I meet her for our photoshoot.

"Growing up, everything around me was about health, medics and caring nurses.

"Doctors at that time would smother you with their care in the nicest possible way."

It was this romantic image of the healthcare system that Karine had in mind when setting up her business in London.

The Russian entrepreneur is the founder of both AngloMedical and PolyClinica, offering international and expat communities access to expert medical care in the UK.

Bursts of Russian interrupt English and a number of camera angles later, the shoot is done and Karine settles down to tell me about her business.

Being "unemployable" as she proudly says, meant she carved out a job for herself in the city.

Karine moved to London 26 years ago and, like most expats, had limited knowledge of how to find medical help – and she knew this would be her business niche.

PolyClinica provides packages for men, women and even overseas students, which include full medical examinations, appointments with top private doctors and nutritionist consultations.

"Imagine yourself in a foreign country, say Russia, and you have an earache. What do you do? Would you be scared? Of course," says Karine.

"It was quite tough to be an emigrée because it is shocking, it's stressful.

"Still, even now, I listen to Russian people speaking English and how they translate from Russian into English and it is seen as forward and forceful and I think to myself, 'You poor things'. This is just how they come across.

"But I went through all this so it is nice to be able to share my wisdom with others."

Karine's thriving business, located just by Harley Street, estimates to have on average 2,500 inquiries per year.

"We could be doing more," she quickly adds, like a true businesswoman.

Ironically, being in charge of a business was the last thing she had in mind as a career.

"When I was growing up, I was thinking to become a journalist, a doctor, or an interpreter. The last thing I wanted to be was a businesswoman, but that's what I am now," she laughs.

"Everything that happens in my life happens by accident; there's always an accident playing a major role, seriously."

She's not lying; ending up in London happened totally by chance.

Karine says: "I came here for some training as a senior manager at Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. But then the country that I loved, and the country that I was a citizen of, ceased to exist – the Soviet Union.

"It was bizarre. I saw the Soviet Union collapse on television in December 1991.

"I go back there with joy, but it is not the country that I know."

Despite proudly calling herself British, being Russian is something Karine holds dear to her heart.

"They call me a chronic emigrée because my parents are actually Armenian," she says.

"But I still consider myself Russian. I studied in a Russian school, I think in Russian, my friends are Russian. But probably unlike pure Russians, I'm a little bit more broad-minded because I embrace the whole world."

Another "Russian trait," which she is particularly grateful for, is her forwardness.

"We are blunt and tend to say what is on our minds, which is not in the culture of the country," she adds.

"I did actually get quite a few bruises for that, but I'm now discovering that my colleagues like me for that and some of them envy it, especially in medicine as you don't have time to tiptoe around."

Living in Marylebone, Karine admits to being a prolific photographer of the sunlit streets, often wandering into Mayfair, where her favourite spot is Shepherd Market.

"Mayfair is full of unexpected village pockets, quiet, very intimate, right in the centre of the hustle and bustle and the architecture, which is second to none," she says.

Having established herself as a force to be reckoned with in business, Karine is now thinking about her next moves.

"I should start winding myself down and allow younger people to step in but I am a control freak," she laughs.

Her daughter Veronika, 32, an occupational psychologist at Sainsburys, is a likely candidate, but Karine is perturbed.

"I would love that but it would be selfish of me because she has such an amazing career, and I actually quite admire her for what she's achieved."

Karine looks tentatively at her mobile, probably guessing how many calls she's had within the hour.

Something tells me this Russian matriarch isn't going anywhere yet.



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