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Now the full
dossier on
the secretive
school first
exposed in
The Standard



"MAIDENS": Leonardo da Vinci.

PANIC: Frith Oliver outside SES's Hampton HQ.

The cult that can crush a woman

FRITH OLIVER is 32, a secretary, divorced and the

by YVONNE ROBERTS



The secret of the SES that ... is like in a number of instances ... not cry, think of nothing and

FRITH OLIVER is 32, a secretary, divorced and the mother of two children. She would consider herself blessed now because she is happily "ordinary".

At 16, however, as a tutor in the bland-sounding School of Economic Science (SES), she was considered close to God, the Absolute.

She had the power to strip people of their self-esteem and direct their lives in the way the SES saw fit. She had the power because she was one of the Chosen.

At the age of 20, following the tenets of the SES, Frith Oliver did not have her husband at the birth of their daughter. He had considered a rehearsal of the SES orchestra more important. The SES always comes before family commitments.

Frith Oliver placed her two children, now 14 and 12, in SES schools (three of which still operate in London). Her son was bullied, her daughter was regarded as rebellious because her adherence to SES principles was flawed. The schools believe in corporal punishment, cold showers, long hours, and teach SES beliefs. Among them is the idea that a woman's rôle is totally subservient to her husband. She has no feelings, no opinions.

"All women are guilty," Frith Oliver was told by the modestly-named Leonardo da Vinci, the SES's leader. "The only true aim of their lives must be to purge that guilt."

Purging the guilt involved dressing the family only in non-synthetic fibres, preparing cold vegetarian food, using no modern appliances to help with the housework. Along with the men, followers of the SES adopt The Measure. They sleep for only five hours a night, rise at dawn, study the Scriptures, Sanskrit, calligraphy and practise meditation.

Celibacy is advocated except for procreation: popular culture in any form is disliked: individuals are expected to work for the SES in much of their free time.

Punished

Feelings, I was told, were not true. Frith Oliver says: "If a person experienced, for example, grief, this was a negative emotion and untrue . . . a person who expressed such an emotion was denying the truth and should be punished . . ."

This rule applies even to those too young to know what "the truth" might be.

Frith Oliver was a child of the SES. Her parents, civil servants in New Zealand, both belonged. Frith was brought to London at the age of 13 for special training by Leon MacLaren. Thousands of others, however, have joined as adults, apparently of their own volition. Or have they?

In Secret Cult (just published by Lion, price £1.95) by The Standard's chief investigative reporter, Peter Hounam, and Andrew Hogg, now a Sunday Times reporter, the authors argue that initially recruits do not know what the SES involves. By the time they do, the School's methods, teachings and disciplines which, they argue, have similarities with classic forms of brainwashing, make it difficult for a believer to make a rational decision.

Special

This kind of secrecy—there is no material available to the general public about the teachings of the SES, no member will openly discuss his or her beliefs—plus other aspects such as the presence of a strong leader, unquestioning obedience and the disruption of all normal family life, convinced Hounam and Hogg after a year's investigation that the SES is a religious cult, "a strange and destructive organisation that is penetrating the corridors of power."

David Boddy, a former director of Press relations at Conservative Central Office and a leading member of the SES, has repeatedly said the School is not a cult but a method of learning through which people can broaden their understanding.

He argues that there is a difference between "private" and "secret" and "it is the right of every student to study in private."

Cult or culture, the SES does bear all the traits of a religious sect. Since time began, religious sects have existed alongside orthodox religious views.

Members of sects don't just want to believe, they need to believe they are special—different from the rest. They are the Chosen and need to behave in a way that sets them apart from the ordinary mortal.

From the Hussites to the Jehovah's Witnesses and those who died at Jonestown, the characteristics are identical. As one woman, a former SES member has said, they are "people who have been given a place so that they feel part of something. . . . If a sect gives some spiritual satisfaction, be it the SES, the Moonies or whatever, are we entitled to raise objections? The history of the School as told by Hounam and Hogg gives some possible answers.

The SES is British-born and based. Founded 40 years ago by Andrew MacLaren, a Labour MP, it was originally a study group to spread the ideas of the 19th-century economist, Henry George. George argued for the abolition of all taxes except for the imposition of a land tax. The economic argument still applies.

Andrew's son, Leonardo da Vinci, a barrister, took over from his father. Leon is now in his seventies.

The secrecy of the SES, they contend, make its influence insidious. It has members in the Liberal Party; it has former members in the Church of England; its activities in Malta were sufficient to alarm the Catholic Church.

Until Hounam and Hogg revealed details of the SES's schools in The Standard, in the summer of 1983, very many of the parents of children at the schools were unaware of the connection.

One mother, for instance, asked Sheila Caldwell, headmistress at the time of St James's and St Vedast girls' schools, why she wore a long skirt (the dress advocated for women). It was only after some evasive replies and more pressure did Ms Caldwell admit that it had something to do with her philosophy. "The truth is that ancient tradition has it that a lady does have her body completely covered . . ."

THE END

ey he lives in a number of mansions,
us. has a taste for claret and is usually
al attended by "young maidens." Once
in Leon, called The Master, took over,
les the beliefs of the SES grew like a
m patchwork quilt: a bit of Platonic
ed thought here, some Hinduism there,
ne a little Gurdjieff and a lot of self-
33, denigration.

en The reward is that once the
he Apocalypse arrives, only the SES
ed believers will survive.. All of which
he begins innocuously enough with an
st individual signing on for evening
ng classes in philosophy and economics.
or A couple of years later the student
ne will find the commitment has built
re up; meditation is added, then week-
ad end courses and residential weeks
y. and a limited diet and a shortage of
er sleep and an increasing burden of
duties.

Celia Ravesi left the SES in
Sydney (the School operates under
slightly different names in Holland,
the USA and Australasia). She tells
how her daughter from the age of
eight spent most evenings on
domestic duties, cleaning bachelors'
flats, cleaning toilet bowls, on the
instruction of the SES.

Celia herself performed similar
tasks, day in, day out, until she could

only cry, think of nothing and
struggle to get by. Frith Oliver,
just before she left the SES in 1978,
had reached a similar state. Her
two children were even more
affected. Both had asthma attacks
and their confidence, she says, had
been peeled away.

In 1983 Frith Oliver decided to
remove them from SES schools. The
children's father, with the help of
senior SES members, took her to
court to fight for custody. They
unsuccessfully attempted to prove
her incompetence as a mother.
Gradually, the three have resumed a
normal life.

"I feel very fortunate now
because each day is good," Frith
says, "but even so I feel a terrible
fear if I have any contact at all
with SES people. It's like a panic
within."

Some, perhaps many, followers of
the SES will say they are satisfied.
A civilised society's reaction to cults,
sects and or educational establish-
ments which demand the sacrifice
of marriages, mental stability and
personal confidence, is not to ban
or proscribe—it is to investigate and
publicise them as Hounam and Hogg
and others have done.

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