**CHAPTER 9**

**New Social Commitments**

Irena, who was thinking as usual one step ahead of developments, actively supported the process of the rebirth of a mature and responsible nation. The immediate need was to create a small elite of cultural and political managers, able to guide the country during the perilous transition period which lay ahead.

The George Soros\(^1\) Foundation (Open Society) is a charitable institution, which had already proved extremely helpful elsewhere in the world. In 1990, George Soros was looking for someone to run a future branch of the organization in Lithuania. Antony Richter, a young representative of Soros, came to Lithuania with a long list of possible candidates and, unknown to Irena, she was on the list. Anthony visited her late one evening and then two days later called her saying that he had chosen two people – Professor Kudaba and Irena – to travel to Dubrovnik to meet George Soros and representatives of other Soros foundations in Eastern and Central Europe. After many discussions, Mr Soros approved the initiating steps and already by the autumn of 1990 the Open Society Fund Lithuania (Soros Foundation) had been established. Professor Kudaba,\(^2\) a remarkable Lithuanian figure, was appointed as Chair and Irena became the Vice-Chair. In an interview with Aage Myhre, the editor of *Vilnews*, Irena remembers how she reacted to Soros’ invitation.

> I was happy to accept the offer. I felt like I was sprouting new wings because this gave me the possibility to do, on a much larger scale, what I had been trying to do all my life – to stimulate critical and creative thinking and bring Lithuania back to Europe and basic European values...to show the alternative to Soviet thinking.

A **Creation of the Open Society Fund – Lithuania (OSFL)**

It was in these circumstances that in 1990 Irena, now aged 62, embarked, together with Professor Česlovas Kudaba, on setting up the *Open Society Fund – Lithuania (OSFL)*, generally known as the Soros Foundation.

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1 George Soros, born August 12, 1930, as György Schwartz, is a Hungarian American finance magnate, and philanthropist. He is known as “The Man Who Broke the Bank of England” because of his US$1 billion investment profits during the 1992 UK Black Wednesday currency crisis. He is Chairman of Soros Fund Management.

2 Lithuanian geographer of great renown, born in 1940.
Among other things, the new structure would help accelerate the democratization process in the country and the creation of a civil society and, to provide for this, introduce a number of new ideas and bring a substantial amount of money into Lithuania. By 1998, the annual budget of the Foundation was more than $5 million and during the first eight years of its activity in Lithuania, more than $25 million would be distributed.

The Soros Foundation

The network of Open Society Foundations (osf), is a grant-making operation founded by George Soros, aimed to shape public policy in order to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, legal, and social reforms. On a local level, osf implements a range of initiatives in order to support the rule of law, education, public health, and independent media. At the same time, the osf works to build alliances across borders and continents on issues such as combating corruption and human rights abuses.

One of the aims of the Foundation is the development of civil society organizations (e.g. charities and community groups) to encourage participation in democracy and society.

In Lithuania alone, more than 50 programmes were run by a total staff of 70 people. More than 500 books were published, over 1000 participants were sponsored annually. Access to the internet was provided for some 700 organizations.

A Performing Arts Programme (theatre, cinema, dance, music) was developed, as was a huge and ambitious education programme sponsoring new text books, introducing new methodology, training teachers, inviting lecturers, taking actions to integrate Roma children etc. Of great importance were the Publishing, Internet, Health Education, Law, Civil Society, Kindergarten programs, the creation of the Journalism Center, the Law Library and many others.

At that time, Moscow still regarded Lithuania as a Soviet Republic and the former administration was still more or less operating. At the same time, Sąjūdis was actively trying to set up a parallel national structure.

The Red Army was also still stationed in Lithuania and represented a menace for all those working for democracy. It was soon to demonstrate its capacity for making a nuisance of itself.

Irena’s comments on this period:

*I wanted to contribute to Lithuania’s democratization process and to help the country become again part of Europe, from which we had been separated for*