

Partnership for Children



Partnership for Children
26-27 Market Place
Kingston-upon-Thames
Surrey KT1 1JH
UK

44 (0) 20 8974 6004

Registered Charity Number 1089810



An Incredible Journey

Director Chris Bale tells the story of how the Zippy's Friends programme in Lithuania was saved from financial ruin by an extraordinary coincidence.

Switzerland, 1991. A father sits down for a talk with his three sons. They're already young adults, having completed university and national service, and they're ready to build careers and make their fortunes.

'You should go East,' their father tells them, 'try your luck. A new page of history is about to be written, but it's not my generation that is going to write it – it's yours.'

The youngest son, fluent in Russian, set off on a reconnaissance mission, bound for the Baltic States and Kaliningrad. He returned to Switzerland unimpressed by Kaliningrad, but reported that Lithuania had been very welcoming. The capital, Vilnius, was an attractive city, and the country was big enough for developing a business but still too small a market to attract major companies.

So in November 1991, the three brothers – George, Nicolas and Oliver Ortiz – drove to Vilnius to build their futures. They tested various business ideas – recruiting models for a French agency, selling peat and oak floorboards, trying to market greetings cards decorated with pressed flowers – but without much success. Then in May 1992, six months after arriving in the city, they launched two ventures which would eventually grow into highly successful international businesses.

The first was a guidebook called Vilnius In Your Pocket. That launched a range of titles that has grown to include guides to 66 European cities. The second bright idea was to rent a shop and sell a consignment of imported foods from France. That led the brothers to open their first small supermarket, selling local goods as well as imported items. They called it IKI, Lithuanian for 'see you later' or



Photo by Martin Kämper

George Ortiz

'until the next time', and it was immediately popular with shoppers who were tired of the limited stock and poor service in State-run stores.

Today, George Ortiz looks back in amusement at how he and his brothers worked in those early days.

'We didn't know what the hell we were doing,' he says frankly. 'We did our first inventory after four months and found that we were looking at a big hole. People were stealing like there was no tomorrow! Stuff was going out through any door, any window, and so we decided that we'd better get our act together. Luckily, the market allowed us to learn from our mistakes because in those days there was really no organised competition.'

Over the next few years 17 IKI supermarkets opened across Lithuania. The brothers decided they needed to centralise distribution, and so in 1998 opened a 10,000 square metre depot.

'From that moment, things just went ballistic,' says George.

Today, IKI has 220 stores, including a range of smaller discount stores



May 2008

MISSION

To help children and young people, throughout the world, develop skills which will enhance their present and future emotional wellbeing.

in smaller towns. It is the second largest chain of supermarkets in Lithuania, with about 18 per cent of the market, and has expanded into Latvia.

'We didn't set out with a business plan,' says George, 'but we did have the ambition to build something.'

What has all this to do with the promotion of children's mental health and emotional wellbeing?

Well, in the autumn of 2006, Zippy's Friends in Lithuania was threatened by lack of funds. Our partner agency Vaiko Labui was trying hard to raise money, and I went to speak at a meeting of the British Chamber of Commerce in Vilnius. It was a very brief presentation because everyone had come to listen to the evening's main speaker, the Minister for the Economy. George Ortiz was in the audience.

Chatting in a London hotel 18 months later, he laughs at the improbability of it all.

'I very rarely go to such meetings, so it was a real coincidence,' he says.

'But, I ask, you'd gone along to listen to the Minister's views on the economy. What were you thinking when some chap from England stood up and started talking about children's mental health?'

'I saw this as a fantastic opportunity for us to step in and be the general sponsor,' he says. 'It's children, it's education, it's preventive health as opposed to treating a problem that has already appeared, and it has a very wide-reaching impact.'

'What really convinced me was one thing you said – that teachers and parents both see a noticeable change in their children after Zippy's Friends. For me, that was it, you didn't need to say anything else. I was enthralled.'

Many sponsors are reluctant to support existing programmes, preferring to feel that their money is creating something new. Did that not deter George?

'No, that's just ego. I don't have an ego problem. I don't need to be first. We don't have to say that we launched the programme. You know, it doesn't happen every day that you find something like this that you really want to support, a programme that has been tested and has strong results, and where money will be well spent.'

'The results speak for themselves. We live in a very fast moving world in which we don't have the time – or rather we don't make the time – to express feelings. A lot of things are bottled up inside. This programme hits so many things that I think are important, and does it in a very neat way.'

IKI agreed to be the main sponsor of Zippy's Friends in Lithuania for three years. It pays about half of the programme's costs, and is Vaiko Labui's largest donor. Its support has enabled the programme



Zipio draugai classes in Lithuania



to grow – this year 200 more teachers have been trained, two new regions have joined the programme, and 9,502 children have been enrolled, 12% more than last year.

'These are pretty amazing numbers,' says George.

Since Zippy's Friends started in Lithuania eight years ago, it has helped 47,608 children. It remains one of the most successful of all our programmes, covering the whole country and being endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Science. It is hard to believe that it started with just 314 children in a few schools and kindergartens in Vilnius.

IKI was one of the first companies in Lithuania to support social activities, focusing on children, health and the environment. Why did a supermarket operator choose these priorities?

'We don't see them as the values of a supermarket operator,' says George. 'They're family values. We were brought up very strictly, with a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, a good sense of what our responsibilities are. The companies have been infused with these family values from Day 1.'

I suggest to George that he and his brothers must feel very proud of what they have achieved since heading East 17 years ago.

'The Chinese have a saying that a journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step. When you're on the journey all you can concentrate on is the next step, trying not to trip over. It's only when you look back that you see that you've actually come quite a long way.'

That's true of IKI and true of Zippy's Friends in Lithuania.

To read more about Zippy's Friends in Lithuania see www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk

To read more about Vaiko Labui (in Lithuanian) see www.vaikolabui.lt

To read more about IKI go to www.IKI.lt

To read more about In Your Pocket go to www.inyourpocket.com

- **Contact us if you would like more information**
- **Partnership for Children, 26-27 Market Place, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT1 1JH England**
- **Email: info@partnershipforchildren.org.uk**
- **Telephone: 44 (0) 20 8974 6004**