LE: This is Leora Eisenberg interviewing David Khukhashvili. The date is May 2nd 2023, and this interview is taking place via Zoom. This interview will be recorded as an audio file and it will be, upon your agreement, accessible publicly.

It would be so great, David, if you could just start with the basic information. Who are you? Where were you born? When were you born? Stuff like that.

DK: Sure. My name is David Khukhashvili. And I grew up in Rego Park, Queens. I'm originally from Tbilisi, Georgia and emigrated to the US in March of 1995 as a result of the Georgian civil war that was happening in the early 90s, right after the fall of the Soviet Union, all the way to peaking in the mid-90s.

LE: How old are you when you came here?

DK: In March of 1995, I was six. Exactly one month later, I turned seven. So I was very little. But old enough... old enough to remember everything.

LE: Old enough... and what does that mean? The civil war?

DK: Yes, the war. I remember the wartime events very clearly. I remember, I remember pretty much whatever... I mean my parents did a very good job shielding me from a lot of the things that were going on outside, but there are certain things that, you know, you can only do so much to shield your children from when you're out there in the streets and you see the violence, and when you're hearing the... when you're hearing the results of the... whether it's screaming, whether it's artillery shells, bullets. You hear all these things and you know what's going on, and it was... it was just so rampant that it was pouring right onto the streets. And then, you also realize the economic effects that come as a result of that and how it affects the family.

So, like, I remember my mother having to go with me -- and my father, you know, had to go to work. And my mother, with me and my sisters, would stand on a breadline starting at 5 am in the morning to get bread because everything was rationed. And it was so bad that it was at a point where there was UN humanitarian aid that was being distributed. But unfortunately, there was a lot of bad actors, even in a civil war. That's always going to happen. There was rampant corruption, and items that were labeled "not for sale: humanitarian aid" were for sale. So... I could go on more about that, but that's… in a nutshell what the experience was.

LE: Do you remember your life in Georgia outside of the civil war? Growing up, family. Did you have family?

DK: Absolutely. It was a wonderful childhood. I had my grandparents from both sides. They didn't live that far from each other. Originally, my family is not from Tbilisi. My father's side is from a village called Banza in the Samegrelo region in western Georgia. My mother's side of the family is originally from Akhaltsikhe, which is not far from the border of Turkey.

So, you know, there were different influences in their cooking and in the liturgy, as far as the traditions went, you know, observing the Jewish customs. But it was very pleasant. I remember going to the Georgian countryside. I remember going with my grandmother. We used to go on vacation to... unfortunately today, de jure... it's still part of Georgia; de facto, it's not, it's in the Abkhazia region of Georgia. I remember Pitsunda, Gagra. I remember, you know, vacationing there with my family.

I remember the countryside, and it was beautiful, and, you know, when you recall the this imagery as a child you see... from that childhood imagination. You see vivid colors, bright colors, and you remember the greenery of the fields. You remember how everything, like meals, were fresh, and how it was just it ... you know, it speaks about the country too, how much potential it has to really be what it can be in terms of, you know, giving a better life for its citizens, but...

And then I remember going to school in Georgia, which was... I remember I went to kindergarten. It was... it was a kindergarten that... we played with other children. I remember there was another boy who was... the only reason I knew that he was Jewish is that when they were praying, and, you know, the children were doing the cross, the teachers would tell us that "you don't have to, you don't have to do the cross to your to yourself, you and this other kid." His name was Aleko. His family, I found out, eventually moved to Israel. He goes, "you and him could play." And I wonder, like, why? Why are we the only ones here? Why can't we join them? You know, whatever they're doing looks cool. But I never experienced any...

Even despite that, I didn't feel different from the other children. So it was, you know, it was wonderful. It was a great experience. Then I remember, I went to Russian school, but unfortunately, that was cut short for four months, because the school that I was going to had… I think... some artillery fire fell on the building in the evening or nearby it... and they eventually closed the school. So four months was all the schooling that I had in first grade in Georgia.

LE: Oh my gosh. So everything was cut short, and then in March 1995, you leave.

DK: Yes.

LE: Did you leave together as a family? Did people come with you? Who made the decision to go? Who were you going with?

DK: So originally there was absolutely no plan to leave. I had family obviously who had left Georgia in the... in fact my maternal grandmother's side of the family -- they were the first Jewish family to leave for Israel when the Iron Curtain reopened in 1969. They went, and they settled in Kiryat Motzkin in Haifa. So that's my... but there was no reason for us to leave. My paternal grandfather was a very successful writer, poet, also screenwriter at the same time. My maternal grandparents, my maternal grandfather -- he was a professor of neurophysiology. Very highly educated. My maternal grandmother was a doctor there, an emergency doctor.

Actually, they didn't have emergency rooms there, so the emergency doctor rode in the ambulance. Yeah, it's kind of like an MD paramedic, basically. And was an architect there, with a background in structural engineering. My mother was a medical doctor there. So everything was there. We were not planning to leave until things were...

When I knew things were bad, I remember, we were at a relative's house. It was for my grandfather's side. I don't remember what the family event was. And I remember one of my second cousins asking my father... I remember telling him, “hey, I'm going to America." And I didn't really picture what that was, and then he turns around to my father, he goes, "are you really leaving for America?" He was older than me. My father told him sadly… he said, "you know, we're planning on it." And then my father told me also, you know, "keep it on the down-low. Don't advertise that so much." So, yes, we came here together. It was in in steps. I came here with... my siblings at the time were not even two. They're twins. So it was my mother, my father, myself, and my sisters. It wasn't a direct trip because we couldn't go directly to the US Embassy in Georgia because of the civil war that was going on. For security reasons, the US Embassy was closed. So we had to go to Russia to get our documentation, and that process wasn't easy.

LE: Sorry, one clarifying question. So in March 1995, you leave Georgia for Moscow?

DK: It was a back and forth. It wasn't a direct path to the US. In March, we came to the US, but there was a sequence of events that that preceded that event, Moscow being the first one. We split up going to Moscow to get the papers. This was a few months before March of 1995. My grandmother and my grandfather from my mother's side went with one of my twin sisters. I went with my parents and the other twin sister. We had to split up because there was a shortage of flights, and seats weren't also readily available, and, you know, you had to get whatever combination worked to get there.

And I remember standing on the line to get to the US Embassy. It was chaos. There were flocks of people, and I remember... My grandmother still recalls the story that my grandfather, who already was having heart problems at the time... My grandmother's holding my sister, who's not even two. And my grandfather was making sure nobody bumps them... so they don't fall, and he's standing in the front. And that was... when you got to the US Embassy, you were given the papers, you were granted permission to come to the US. So after that, we went back to Georgia. And by the way, in Moscow, we were staying at a relative's house -- my father's first cousin, who now lives in Israel, had a business there at the time, and we stayed by his apartment for almost a month. He very graciously hosted us, and then after we went back to Georgia, we went to Frankfurt, Germany. And in Germany, we had we had like about a day stopover. We went to Paris, France, where we were given the final approval. Then from Paris, France...

LE: From the US Embassy there?

DK: The representatives arrived at the airport to give us the... that's how I remember it. We didn't have to leave the airport. We were just given the entry permit into the US in Paris. And from Paris, we came directly to New York. And that's basically... it was just myself, my siblings, and my parents.

LE: And did you guys have refugee status?

DK: Yes, we had refugee status. Yes.

LE: Was New York always going to be the destination? Did you consider other ones? Did you have relatives here already?

DK: Yes. So, my parents obviously didn't know the first thing about the US. They didn't know... They knew that obviously there was a Georgian-Jewish community already in Queens, and my uncle -- my maternal [uncle] from my mother's side -- my uncle... he's also a medical doctor by education. He came to the US before we did. He came in the early 90s. And he got married and started having a family. And he was the closest relative that we had here before coming. My father had some first cousins here already living in the US, but the closest blood relative we had in America -- the closest one -- was my uncle at that time. And that's actually where we stayed. We split up. My father and I, we stayed briefly by my father's cousin, and we were switching off. And the rest of the family, we stayed by my uncle and my aunt, who were already living here. And my cousin at the time... he was a baby. So, obviously, we went back and forth until we got an apartment. We were constantly on the move.

LE: How long was that for, that being on the move?

DK: It took about... I would say just under a year. Nine months. Six to nine months.

LE: Yes. I'm sorry, I cut you off. You were saying something.

DK: No, no, no. It was six to nine months. And then I remember my father... We were walking by 63rd and 99th Street. 63rd Drive. There's an intersection there, and there used to be... there's a Catholic school. Our Lady of the Angelus, and they had a huge soccer field -- which today, there's a condo project going up there. But back then, the grass was unkept, and I remember my father pointing out the apartment building saying, you know, "that's going to be our home." And it was an interesting moment because I kind of felt, you know, you're going back and forth. You don't have housing stability. So that kind of came as a relief. That, you know, I feel that now we have some kind of a home, like we had back in Georgia.

LE: Wow, so housing instability is one of the big challenges I'm hearing. What were some of the other challenges that you and your family faced when you came to New York?

DK: Gosh, I don't even know where to start. There were many. So, my father is... I mentioned my father was an architect in Georgia. He was working on developing some very interesting

projects there, largely on the multifamily side. My mother was a medical doctor. So when you come to the US, essentially the education that you have there, the credentials are not applicable here. My father also has a disability, he's partially deaf in one ear, so becoming an architect again was not feasible for him, because by the time you have a decent command of the English language, it takes a lot of time. And then to get the AIA certifications to get certified as an architect -- that would take too much time. So he parlayed his design skills and went to work in the jewelry industry right away as a designer. And my mother -- it took my mother eight years to get re-certified because she was also a full-time mom. We also had a tragedy along the way in that we lost my grandfather very, very suddenly. Less than four years after we came to the US, we lost him. So that's on top of the, you know... when you're a new immigrant, you're getting acclimated to a new country. And now you're dealing with a loss of somebody who had been a family pillar, who had been providing as much help as he could to the family. And that was... that was definitely a very, very difficult moment. So eventually, she did get recertified as a doctor. And while my mother was studying, my father was working.

My maternal grandparents - they came a year later, in 1996. They immigrated a year later, and it made sense for them, because my uncle was here, my mother was here already, so they had their children in America. And they came a year later, and they helped us tremendously. My grandmother would babysit us, my cousins. My grandfather would also when he was alive. My paternal grandparents stayed in in Georgia because my father lost his brother at a young age, and they didn't want to leave. They were attached emotionally to Georgia, plus he had two children -- a wife and two children. And they wanted to be there for his wife and two children.

After my grandfather's passing, my grandmother eventually ended up moving to America as well. My paternal grandmother. And she lived here for 10 years until her passing in 2018.

LE: Wow. So it's one big family story. First, a bunch of people came, and then the other ones came, and then someone else came, and then someone else came.

DK: Yes, yes, absolutely. My paternal first cousins came here as well. But then they ended up going back to Georgia.

LE: Really?

DK: Yes. They came here after my grandmother emigrated. They came here as well for a short duration of time, and they ended up repatriating to Georgia.

LE: They didn't like it here? Couldn't make it work?

DK: I guess it's... they're both doctors. So already when you have a network of friends established, when you're used to certain customs, and you're used to a certain way of life, that could have been a factor. The other factor is also... I guess it could be where they thought would have been the most beneficial and optimal for them and their children as well. So they ended up repatriating to Georgia, but this was post- 2010...

LE: That they repatriated?

DK: Yes. Yes, they came here right in 2009-2010, and they ended up going back about a decade after, less than a decade after.

LE: Wow. So very recently.

DK: Yes. Yes.

LE: Did you have any institutional support when you got here, either from organizations like HIAS or from the Georgian-Jewish shul [synagogue]? Or from other Jewish organizations?

DK: Yes, absolutely. So obviously that was one of the other hardships. When you're a new immigrant, you have not just housing instability, but financial instability, because you're essentially... You're out there at the mercy of finding a job to provide for a family because, like I said, your credentials are... they're not applicable. You're starting life anew, so we did get help from HIAS. I remember that very vividly. I remember getting furniture from them.

Obviously, my community helped tremendously. My community... By and large, we're a very simple, very humble community of... comfortable means. But, you know, thankfully, we have a few families who are affluent. But I would say most of the community is on the middle-class spectrum. And, you know, everyone helped to the extent they could. We even had... I'll never forget it. There's actually... there was actually a man who... we have the same last name. He passed away a while ago, and he owned a furniture store. My father went to him and said, you know, "I'm looking for a job." And he goes, "you're an educated man. I can't give you a job lifting furniture and lifting heavy... Why don't you come with me? Let’s go, and I'll introduce you to people." He took my father to 47th Street, where the hub of the jewelry industry is in New York. And he introduced my father to other Georgian Jews, as well as Bukharian Jews, who were already in that business. And that was the first recommendation that my father had, so that was a very touching story. Yes... and I think his son runs that business now, but I told his children that story around his passing, and they were very touched by it. But yes, the community came, they helped as much as they could. But it was largely those two -- the Georgian-Jewish community, to the extent that they were able to, and HIAS.

LE: And what was your life like when you just got here? You integrated into this new society when you were almost seven. What did that look like?

DK: My English was very poor. My parents did hire an English tutor for me in Georgia when they knew that we were going to come to the US. So... that was, I guess, them doing everything they could to make sure that I had a smooth transition, a smooth integration. But, obviously, as a child, you're always going to stand out. I was looking at a picture -- I was actually telling my wife the other day that there's a picture I want to show her. You know, she always makes fun of me -- you know, when you're a father of two girls, they have to be matching. There's a certain way

that the girls like to dress, and I am completely clueless about how to do that. So I mentioned to my wife, "you should see a picture of me in day camp, my first time going to day camp, the first summer after we came here." You know, the kids are wearing shorts and a t-shirt, and I'm wearing... I'm wearing these... I don't know what on Earth it was -- like sandals... and pants with suspenders... and like a button down short-sleeved [shirt].

LE: Were you wearing socks with your sandals, too?

DK: I think so. And it was like, "oh my Lord." What... like, spot who is the foreigner here, and that type of thing. So, I apparently gave off a very foreign vibe when I was a kid. Whatever that means. But obviously, besides not knowing the language, I dressed differently from the other children because I still had my clothes from from Georgia. And then I remember... day camp was a tough transition. That was my first time dealing with children in the US. That was a very, very difficult transition. But what gave me a kind of a sense of solace and made it a little bit easier for me was that there were children from the Bukharian community in that camp who spoke Russian. And I speak Russian as a second language because my mother's side of the family, they had a Russian education in Georgia. So I do speak Russian -- although today not as well as I used to -- but I understand everything. And I was able to communicate with some of the camp counselors who are from the Bukharian community whenever I couldn't... I was always able to get my message across in either English or in Russian. So it was in Forest Hills, that camp. And that gave me, you know a sense of ease that I was able to transition.

And then I went on to first grade in a Jewish school. I remember the first time I went to the school. You had to go based on a recommendation, and one of the rabbis in the Georgian-Jewish Community who's no longer alive -- Rabbi Pinkhas Cohen was his name -- he knew my family from Tbilisi. He passed away a long time ago. I'm going to say 1998, the same year as my grandfather passed. And I remember he.... it was my uncle and my father and Rabbi Pinkhas who took me to this Jewish school. And Rabbi Pinkhas was talking... There was the principal of the school, the rabbi. Rabbi Pinkhas didn't speak English well, but he spoke to him in fluent Hebrew. And I remember the first installment of the tuition Rabbi Pinkhas paid himself out of his own pocket.

So I remember going to that... being in that environment. For me, that was a great thing to be because I understood the similarities. I knew obviously Shabbat. I knew the holidays. I knew anything to do with religious observance. So right away, I saw, " okay, this is something that I know from the old country, that I'm familiar with and I'm accustomed to." And the teachers there, whether it was for religious studies or secular studies, they would always make sure that I had a very smooth transition, and that I was always looked after. They didn't let anybody bully me, or… you know, I knew how to stand up for myself, but they never let it get to that situation.

LE: Right, right. And were you going to the Georgian shul [synagogue] at this time?

DK: I grew up in that shul. I've been going to that shul for almost 30 years, and I still... even though I live... I grew up in Rego Park, so it was like a five-minute walk from that shul. Now it's

about a 20-minute walk. I don't go there as often as I want to, and when it's bad weather, I obviously go [to a synagogue] a little bit closer, but I go there as much as I can. And at least on Shabbats regularly, and I serve on the board there now. So that's a very dear place for me.

LE: What role did it play in your childhood, your adolescence, and your life in Rego Park?

DK: Yeah, absolutely. Being in the big city of New York, being in the US, obviously, I was acclimated and grew up in American culture. I consider myself obviously more American than anything else because I've spent most of my life here, and this is home for me. This is the country I grew up in and home that I love. But for me, the Georgian community... going to the shul was always like kind of going back to a home base within a home base. It was a connection back to the roots where I was able to look at people, and, in fact, there was one gentleman who was the caretaker of the synagogue, and I remember him telling me how he used to sit in the synagogue in Tbilisi next to my great-grandfather.

LE: Oh, really?

DK: And he used to tell me about my great-grandfather, and then I knew people who knew my grandfather, who were actually his colleagues in the university in a different department. One person was a mathematics professor who knew him very well. I would, you know, look around, and it was always a way to get grounded back into the roots, and it always felt like a place of home that... When I walk in there, it's kind of like your domain, but, you know, you're very comfortable, and you know everybody. You know how to communicate with the elderly there. It's a different generation entirely... our grandparents' generation. So, you know, you learn how to bridge the gap in communication. You learn a lot of things there, a lot of great things.

LE: Did you grow up going to youth minyan [prayer group] there?

DK: They had a youth minyan at some point, but it wasn't really... It didn't really take off in the sense that... At that point already, a lot of the Georgian community was kind of dissipating. Portions were moving to Long Island, New Jersey, Manhattan.

LE: What year was that?

DK: That probably started in the early 2000s onward. You started seeing a migration out to the suburbs. My uncle eventually ended up moving out to Long Island from Forest Hills. And I have some friends who ended up going to New Jersey. All over -- and that's the other thing. They didn't really go to one specific location. Everybody went in a place that was, I guess, convenient for their needs at the time, which is, you know, completely understandable, but my uncle happened to move to an area where there's a thriving Jewish community, Jewish population, with Jewish schools, synagogues. I guess everybody went wherever their needs were, and long term, that's probably what the outlook looks like for the community, but the synagogue will always be there as a home base.

And I think I mentioned to you before we started [the interview] that we're doing the construction on it, and the impetus behind that is that we want to turn it into a multi-purpose room, where despite the fact that the community will be in other places physically -- and a small remnant will be left in Queens -- that will always be the place that they could come back to for communal functions, whether it's... it could be events as far as getting together, remembering, making something like a heritage night, using it as a place for community gatherings for times of happiness or, unfortunately, times of distress and sadness. You see that model in other communities as well, where they took an existing building that was located where the community had been at that time, and then they repurposed it when the community moved to another location. So that's kind of what we would like to do.

And one of the goals I would love to do is to create sort of like a -- if I could make a physical location out of it, I'll be very, very happy -- but for now [to] create a digital museum, putting basically an anthology of Georgian-Jewish history where people contribute their family pictures. That's the other purpose that I envision, at least for that build-out that we're doing on the top floor.

LE: Very cool. I think that kind of leads me into this last section. How has the community changed since you've been here?

DK: Yeah. So when we first came here, I remember, the community was much larger in numbers. The attendance in synagogue was a lot higher because that was largely driven by the elderly population. As I look around today, when I go there, it's a little bit painful to see that... I remember that man... I remember that lady who used to sit right there, overlooking the ark, where the Torahs are. And I remember people in the community who are no longer around today. That evokes a feeling of sadness. But also optimism at the same time, because you know these people... As I look back and I think about it, my parents were 37 and 33 when they came here. These people had been probably around the same age, maybe even older, and they came here in search of a dream. They came here with hopes, and, you know, that hope still continues, and my hope is that the community will also continue, but when I was younger, when I was smaller, you saw there were marriages within the community. Today, you're seeing that that's not the case. Which is no problem with that -- at all, right? But you are seeing... obviously in the Jewish faith, there's always... you know, when it comes to marriage or traditional things, you marry within the faith. In our community -- the Georgian-Jewish community -- we have we have some degree of assimilation, where there is intermarriage with other faiths. But [it's] very small, and the ones who are more traditional are marrying into the Bukharian community and eventually being incorporated into the Bukharian community. Ones who are more observant are probably marrying into the Ashkenazi community. I myself did not marry somebody from the Georgian-Jewish Community, but my wife is half-Ashkenazi, half-Egyptian Jewish. So you're seeing a lot less of that.

For a community to have continuity, you have to figure out a way to stick together. So the one possible solution is that you have at least one parent from the Georgian-Jewish Community. That could still be something used as a baseline where you can go and formulate something off

of that. It doesn't necessarily... So you're seeing a lot less marriages within the community, and you're seeing... It's changed in the sense that obviously much of the older generation is gone. There are people -- those who are around today are energetic, absolutely amazing people, but it's not the same feeling as it was when, you know, we had a larger population. Today, as a community, we get together during weddings. Unfortunately, during times of sadness, the Georgian-Jewish Community is known and very famous for its support that it shows people within the community during that time. Everyone gets together. During the High Holy Days, the community comes [together] again. During Purim -- that's when, you know, you're actually able to drive up -- compared to other Jewish holidays, where there are restrictions on travel. During Purim, I do see people from the community who live in Long Island, in New Jersey still coming to the synagogue. Their synagogue. So it's very nice to see that.

LE: How have you maintained your connections with your Georgian background as you've grown up and move farther away from the shul?

DK: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. So one way to do that obviously is... a lot of the people in the Georgian-Jewish community... there was always a sort of a need to Americanize, and you see this in the Georgian community in Israel, where you have last names that are not... you know they're Georgian Jews, but they don't have Georgian Jewish last names because they changed it. They shortened it. You go from Yakobashbili to Jacobson, let's say.

LE: Like Michaeli.

DK: Mikhaelashvili to Mikhaeli in Israel. Very common. So I never changed my last name, and I like to say that I had the most reason to. You know, kh, kh, so... I never changed it. To me, you know, it's helped me in many ways, but it also hasn't. Obviously in the business world, you know, when people see a last name that sounds strange to them, there's always a slight moment of hesitation that's going to come with it, and then they get to know the person and, you know, whatever notions they had or whatever they thought... people don't even know that it's a Georgian last name. I'm constantly asked if I'm Lebanese or Greek, and they have no idea what this last name is.

And I would say that I'm very in touch with the Georgian culture itself. One thing that I think is unique to our community is that we didn't really... the Georgian-Jewish community is actually one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world. We trace it back all the way to the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. One thing I'll say too is that this is not something that's just oral tradition. This is actually documented within Georgian history itself. So there is a source, an academic source, on which to rely on for this.

That being said, I think that we have a very unique heritage in the sense that we were very ingrained within Georgian culture and Georgian society. It had a tremendous influence on us in how we conduct ourselves. Obviously, the Jewish faith, you know, it's more than Judaism. It's more than just a religion. It's also cultural. There's a huge cultural element behind it, which we never forgot and always carried. But the Georgian aspect of it -- being in Georgia for almost

3,000 years -- had a tremendous influence on us. So at heart, we're very Georgian-cultured in our mannerisms and our mentality. Even, you know, when it comes to, for example, Georgian music, Georgian dance, this is intangible heritage that's part of what makes Georgia so unique, and that's something that I've also taught to my daughters, to some extent. One of them was actually singing these folk songs. Like, complete Georgian folk songs... that outside of Georgia, you wouldn't normally know what they are.

And I do know that the Jewish community... what's similar is that much like the Jewish people, the Georgian people are very few in numbers, and they've been conquered by Greeks, Byzantines, Romans, Ottomans, Persians, Arabs, Mongols... all these empires have invaded Georgia, and one thing that's very... there's actually a video that I shared with somebody [that I] came across. It's a Georgian video recalling the history of Georgia, and in the 1700s, when the invading Persian army -- I believe it was Nader Shah -- was invading Georgia, there was a Jewish community there that saved the queen of Georgia from being captured. They had the fortress surrounded. And the Georgian army was trapped in the fortress, and it was a battalion. It was the Georgian Jews who decided that "we're going to pick up arms, and we're going to fight." And then, the Persian army thought that they were encircled and outnumbered, and then they chased them all the way out when they were retreating. So the Georgian Jews fought side by side with the Georgians, and the way we identify ourselves is... we were very unique in the sense that...

What's interesting is that in Georgia, we were called Jews, but outside of Georgia, we're called Georgians. So... you know, there's always a question of "what am I?" So for me, my Georgian identity and my Jewish identity -- it goes hand in hand. But obviously, the Jewish element is my faith, and that's my biblical ancestry, so to speak. But the Georgian side of it is still ingrained in the heritage as well. So you have two unique factors, and you use them as a source of strength, because Jewish people are about perseverance and surviving through adversity, and Georgians are by nature very hospitable, but they also know how to persevere through adversity. And they're fighters. They're fighters -- and not in a violent way. When you're on the defensive for so long, you build up a sentiment of courage. You have values of bravery, valor, all that coming from the Georgian side. So, when you combine the two, you have a force of nature. That's how I look at it.

LE: And my last question is have you been back to Georgia since you left?

DK: Unfortunately not. I have not. One day, I would like to, but I don't feel that I'm ready for that moment yet, because number one -- the summers that I spent are in the Abkhazia region, which is historically part of Georgia -- and it's occupied by Russia today. And that's a very painful feeling for me. I'm speaking as a Georgian. It's a very painful thing for me to see that that part of the country's not intact.

And second -- so much has changed in Tbilisi that I'm not sure how much of it I'll be able to reflect on from childhood. So there's... I guess the feeling of nostalgia that comes with that. There's also another sentiment of fear that, you know, that kindergarten that I went to is

probably not there anymore. That school that I went to is probably rebuilt. My grandparents' apartment complex -- there's high-rises all around now. And the old building is where they used to live, so... Not quite ready for it yet. But one day.

LE: Well, thank you so much. David, I've asked all my questions. Is there anything that you want to add to what you've already said?

DK: Oh, it's been my pleasure. And I really thank you for taking the time to research the Georgian-Jewish community specifically and the experiences in immigration, because... we're very small numbers in the US, very easy to go overlooked. And I really appreciate you zeroing in on this little microcosm within the Jewish community. And also the Georgian community as well, I guess we're part of that, too, in a way. And I really appreciate you getting your story out and doing such a groundbreaking project, really.

LE: Thank you so much.