LE: This is Leora Eisenberg interviewing Anonymous. The date is April 1st 2023. And this interview is taking place via Zoom. I'm in Boston, and Anonymous is in Las Vegas. This interview will be recorded as an audio file, and it will be, upon Anonymous's agreement, accessible publicly. All right, let's get started. So I was hoping that we could just start off today with some biographical information. Who are you? Where are you from? Where were you born? Stuff like that.

A: I was born in Tbilisi, Georgia -- at that time the Soviet Union -- on February 26, 1963. My parents were typical Soviet intelligentsia. My father was an engineer. Later he became the chief engineer of the Tachometry Institute, which was the head Institute of Tachometry in the Soviet Union, which was, by the way, very unusual, because, first of all, he was Jewish, and also he wasn't member of the Communist Party.

LE: Interesting.

A: Usually, you wouldn't appoint chief engineers who weren't communists and [were] Jews. And my mother was a physics teacher. Most of her life she taught at the artillery school. That was an institute of higher education for the Soviet military. Tbilisi Artillery Academy, I would say. And I went to school number 116, which was an English school. So part of the subjects were taught in English. I graduated in 1979, and the same year, I enrolled in the Georgian Institute of Theater and Cinematography. Actually, at that time, no, it wasn't cinematography. It was called Georgian Theater Institute. Later on, it became... changed the name. I was always interested in theater, always wanted to become first an actor and then director. And I started with the famous Georgian director Mikhail Tumanishvili. I graduated in 1984, worked in various Georgian theaters, including the Rustaveli Theater, the Opera Theater. Did some productions at Telavi Theater, **Chiatura [?]** Theater, Sukhumi Theater, and also established a Children's Theater, which was called **Sapikhurebi**, where teenagers were performing for for teenagers and not only teenagers. And little by little, this theater became pretty popular in Tbilisi.

LE: And what year did you establish it?

A: Uh, 85, I believe. It was the next year after graduation. Or maybe 84. I don't remember now exactly. 84-85. Probably, yes, I graduated in 84, so 85. And... yes, must have been 85. In 1988, which was the time of perestroika, glasnost, friendship and very good relationship between the Soviets and the Americans, an American delegation from an organization called International Arts for Peace, based in Brookline, Massachusetts, came to Tbilisi, and someone brought this delegation to my theater, and they loved the show. And they invited us to tour the United States.

LE: "Us" meaning that whole troupe, the administration?

A: The whole troupe. I will omit some details how we were not allowed first to go as a troupe because it was still the Soviet Union, so they said... they, I mean the Peace Fund and Peace

Committee of Georgia, when they received this invitation. Everything had to be done through some Soviet organizations. So it was done through the Peace Fund, so they sent their...

LE: The Peace Fund of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic?

A: Yes, exactly. So in 1989, they sort of... you know, concealed this invitation. Instead of our theater, they sent their friends and relatives and friends of relatives and relatives of friends. But then I learned about it and... you know, I was furious because it was obviously our invitation. So... they -- just to appease me -- they sent me as an only representative of the theater, promising that the next trip will be with the theater. So that's how I got to the United States the first time. And it was, believe it or not, around April 9th, 1989. So these... these horrible events in Tbilisi happened while we were here [in the US].

LE: Wow, I see.

A: Yeah. It was a delegation. Actually, some of the delegates were very nice. It was, for example, **Thomas Borashvili**, who recently died, the bass player. And Dato Evgenidze, and some other nice people. I don't want to badmouth them, but actually, the invitation was ours. [laughter]

LE: And... but that invitation was meant for a short visit. That wasn't meant for...

A: Yes! No, no, no, it was for... just for a tour.

LE: Okay.

A: And it was a cultural exchange. This organization headed by Judith Woodruff, I have to mention her name, of course, their idea was to establish contacts with... between Soviet youth and American youth, so they would organize camps, where children would perform together... and that kind of stuff.

LE: Okay.

A: So anyway. Then, in 1990...

LE: So you came back... how long did you go to the US for?

A: About a month.

LE: A month, okay. And then you came back to Tbilisi.

A: I went back to Tbilisi. And then the next invitation was already honored and respected.

LE: For the whole troupe?

A: And we performed here, as far as I remember, in 13 states. It was a pretty extensive tour. It was a musical specially written for our theater by **Giorgi Makharashvili**. Very, very good, very talented Georgian composer. So...and it was a big success. I won't be, you know, shy about it.

LE: And it was all done in Georgian? You weren't performing in Russian.

A: In Georgian. Only in Georgian. Yes, Georgian musical, written in Georgian by a Georgian composer and performed by young Georgian actors. And then we became friends with Judith Woodruff, and I became the representative of International Arts for Peace in Georgia. And we would continue these exchanges. So we would bring -- I mean we, the Georgians -- would bring Americans to Tbilisi and Telavi and Georgian groups to the United States. And that's how I started traveling to the United States, and I came here five times on short visits, about a month each.

LE: And this was during the Soviet period that you came five times?

A: That was... in 89, then twice in 1990. Actually, twice in 89. It was in the spring and in the fall of 89. Then the spring and the fall of 90, then the spring of 91. And then in the fall of 1991, I came here by myself for negotiations and just to discuss our future plans. And at that time, that was in late October - early November of 1991; the civil war started in Georgia. And my parents told me, "don't come back. Whatever you do, just... just don't come back." Because we lived in downtown, and the war was actually around our house. And it was a very difficult decision. But I decided to stay for a while. Until the dust settles there. So it's been 32 years since and the dust hasn't settled yet. [laughter] I mean, the war is over -- the war that was happening in late 91, but still the situation in Georgia is... unstable.

So it was, as I said, a very difficult decision because in Tbilisi, I had everything. And at my theater, I was... how to put it mildly... maybe not popular, but I have certain, you know, certain amount of recognition.

LE: Right.

A: And I had several jobs and shows in various theaters, so everything was fine. I wasn't thinking about immigration, but everything changed with this civil war because... between supporters of Gamsakhurdia and the opposition, you probably remember when they had all these shootings on Rustaveli Prospect -- Rustaveli Avenue – [that] destroyed half of the street and many houses around. Anyway, so I stayed here, and I had to start from scratch.

LE: And where did you end up? Where were you when you made the decision to stay in the States?

A: Brookline, Massachusetts, because I was staying with Judith Woodruff.

LE: Okay.

A: So she became sort of my American mother.

LE: Okay,

A: And I am really, really thankful to her. And... so that's how I ended up in the United States. I applied for political asylum. But at that time, it was a very, very lengthy process. Took like eight and a half years to... to get a call to an interview, so for eight and a half years I couldn't leave the country. I could stay here legally. I had authorization to work. I was, you know, legalized but I couldn't leave the country and come back.

LE: So you stayed here for eight years without leaving the country?

A: Exactly. And as I said, I had to start everything from scratch. I realized that nobody needed a Georgian theater director here. And since I always loved languages, I went to the so-called "English school" and private teacher. And actually it was, I would say, my second profession. So I decided that my second profession will become my first one. And I became an interpreter. Actually, I worked a little bit in theater here. I would say by inertia because I still thought that I was, you know, a theater director, so there was an amateur group of teenagers in Boston. They somehow found me, and I was happy to do three shows with them.

LE: Okay.

A: That was 94-95. Maybe 93-94-95, I believe.

LE: I'm assuming that that show was not in Georgian.

A: No, that was in Russian, that was already in Russian. Yes. There are not enough Georgians in Boston.

LE: Okay, okay.

A: But there were enough Russian teenagers, and they were very happy to do the *Snow Queen* and *Pippi Longstocking*. And *Louis XIV*, or nobody would believe that there were three shows.

LE: Right.

A: And little by little, I started working as an interpreter. Getting more and more gigs. And then I passed an exam to the State Department. I passed an exam to the Massachusetts courts in both languages, Georgian and Russian. And then I passed an exam to the Immigration Court. So now I'm a certified interpreter, simultaneous interpreter, US State Department contractor, Massachusetts courts contractor, and immigration courts contractor. So that's probably in the nutshell my story.

LE: Wow.

A: So I never lived in any other cities but Tbilisi, Georgia and Greater Boston, Massachusetts. Both on the 43rd parallel. So it's the same latitude. So I vote horizontally.

LE: I imagine the differences are tremendous. What struck you when you emigrated? What were the big differences that you noticed between Boston and Tbilisi? What was hard to adjust to?

A: It was really hard to adjust because, you know, I was 28 when I moved here, and, of course, you're used to the traditions and the style of communication between people. So I had to adjust... and just a simple thing: in Georgia, it's okay to knock on someone's door and say "hello, I'm here!" and they will open the door and say "oh, coming, coming. Let's have dinner together, coffee." Or whatever. It's unimaginable here. You have to make a call three days in advance and I look at my calendar. "Let's compare our schedules. 3:30, nah nah nah." That was one of the differences.

And also what I really like about the United States -- and I can't imagine myself living back in Georgia -- is the adherence to promises and strict schedule. Because if you say here that we will meet at nine o'clock in the morning, it means 8:59. In Georgia, it means around 9. Maybe 10. Or maybe if I don't wake up, you call me, and I say "Okay, okay. Call me back later." And so maybe it's changing now, but still... the, you know, perception of time. And scheduling is a little bit different.

LE: I can imagine. So these were big differences… and you said you came alone. I imagine one of the biggest differences between Boston and Tbilisi was the fact that you were now without your parents, without the community that surrounded you. Did anyone come later? Did your parents come later? How did you build a community?

A: Little by little, through some connections. And I made a lot of friends within Russian community, mostly. I don't have... well, I have one very close Georgian friend who came later on. And maybe you've heard about him. He's a pianist, Sasha Korsantia. He's a famous pianist from Georgia, winner of many international competitions. And we were friends there in Tbilisi, but he didn't come to Boston right away. He came here a little bit later, in the late 90s. So he's probably my only real Georgian friend or friend from Tbilisi. Others are from Leningrad, Moscow and so on. So it's mostly Russian-speaking community.

LE: And are they largely Jewish?

A: I would say 90 percent of them.

LE: Was that a conscious choice by virtue of your being Jewish? Or is that just by virtue of the surroundings?

A: By virtue of the surroundings, because most of the immigration is the Jewish immigration.

LE: Right, right.

A: There are some, you know, ethnically Ukrainians, Russians, or whatever, but I don't discriminate.

LE: No, makes sense, makes sense. Yes. But your parents stayed behind.

A: At the beginning, it was even difficult to communicate with them. During the war and after, it was very expensive to make a phone call. One minute of international call was two dollars, which was a very big amount of money for me at that time in 1991. But... so... they came to visit me. Since I couldn't go there, they started visiting me in mid-90s. I don't remember exactly when, I think it was 96 when they came to visit me. And then I filed an application for family reunification.

LE: Right.

A: I remember it was the year 2000. And it was approved, and they could come here. And they agonized. Mostly my father agonized about this decision and finally decided not to come. That was a very difficult decision for both of them. My mother was more inclined to come here, but my father said no. First, he was still working. And then he was a real... what they call in Georgian "tbiliseli."

LE: *Tbilisets*. [“Tbilisi native” in Russian.]

A: Yes, and he couldn't imagine himself living in another country. Different language, surroundings. And he just didn't want to. And they agonized for – I don't know -- probably a year. Not a year, but less than a year... and then decided no. But they still kept coming here. And at least once a year, every year, they would come here for a month just to stay with me. And then in 2007, they were in Boston, and my father unexpectedly died. Just all of a sudden. Nothing could predict that or... they were no signs of that, but heart failure. And it just happened. Within several minutes. And then my mother decided that nothing keeps her there any longer. And so in 2008, the next year, she immigrated to Boston. And she was very happy here. But in unfortunately, she got cancer, and in 2013, she died as well.

LE: I'm sorry to hear.

A: But that's the story.

LE: Yes. Were you able to keep in touch with other friends from Georgia? I'm imagining that other people moved to Israel, someone moved to the US, someone moved to Canada. Did you maintain those connections?

A: Constantly, constantly. I have very good friends in Georgia. Most of those with whom I went to the theater school together, some classmates, and some other friends. We constantly communicate… now mostly via Facebook. Of course, that's the modern mode of communications, but sometimes we call each other. And I used to go there every year before COVID, so I haven't been there since. But from year 2000, I would visit Tbilisi almost every year, with some exceptions.

LE: For how long? A week, a month?

A: Two weeks.

LE: So how have you kept in touch with your Georgian roots? It sounds like it's still a very big part of your life.

A: It is. I followed and use… I keep in touch with my friends, as I said. I watch Georgian movies when I have a chance.

LE: Yes.

A: But that's basically it. That's still part of my identity, I would say. Part of my life. And also, I work with Georgian language. So I constantly have this, you know, opportunity to talk to Georgians who are coming here with the delegations from the State Department. So I have some inside -- insider's -- view of what's going on there.

LE: Sure.

A: And I have the best friends there. I really love them.

LE: That's wonderful. That's wonderful. And I'm assuming the answer is no, just by virtue of the way that Boston is, but was there any kind of support for you from any kind of Georgians when you moved here? I know in Rego Park, the Georgian community was helpful for immigrants, Georgian-Jewish immigrants, but I'm assuming in Boston that was not the case.

A: No, I didn't know any Georgians. I still remember I was so surprised at the very beginning of my stay in Boston, when in a store -- I even remember where it was, a TJ Maxx -- I heard someone speaking Georgian. I was amazed because, you know, there are no Georgians, no Georgian-speakers in Boston. So I approached them and I said **"[something in Georgian],"** so I don't know where these people are now, but that was my first exposure to Georgian language. But no, there is no Georgian community, as far as I know. Maybe I'm missing something, but there is no Georgian community, and there is no formal structure for support.

LE: Sure. Did the Jewish community provide any support when you emigrated?

A: I never asked, but informally, since my friends were those who found the job for me or recommended me or this and that, they were Jewish. But I wouldn't call it, you know, special... specifically Jewish support.

LE: Right, right. Looking back on all of it now, what would you say that your expectations were when you came here? Were they met? Do you feel like you accomplished what you set out to accomplish when you came here? I realize it wasn't planned.

A: Well, the first plan was just survival. Yes, you can guess. And frankly speaking, I wasn't sure that I would stay here and someone, one of my friends, recently reminded me of the letter, an audio leather that I sent there. If you remember, there were cassettes, so I would record it on a cassette. That was at the very beginning of my stay here. And I found the job as a babysitter which was... really, you know, real help for me, because I didn't have a place to stay, and some family needed a babysitter, so they gave me a room. They didn't pay anything, but for room and board and some food, I was driving their children. That was really helpful, that helped me to survive for several months.

LE: That was when you just got here?

A: That was when I decided to stay here. I think it was from December to May 91 to 92. December 91 to May 92. At first, it was just survival and then little by little, I realized that, you know, I love the city. I love the people who I met the from the theater things I started. I realized that there are people who are interested in theater, people who share my interests. There is some Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, some kind of community of theater lovers and so on. So little by little, I fell in love with the city. And then… I don't know. I... I don't like talking about goals. I never had goals in my life, and I would never say that in five years, "I see myself..." Right? I just do what I do and enjoy what I'm doing. And I'm pretty happy with what I have because I live in the best city in the United States. And I can say that responsibly because I've been to 48 states and most of the cities and towns of the United States because of the State Department job, and I know no other city where I would be as happy as I am in Boston. I really love it. I forgot to mention that I also do tours of Boston.

LE: Okay.

A: Yes. I'm a tour guide.

LE: Wow. For visitors from all over the world? Or Russian-speakers or Georgian-speakers?

A: Mostly Russian. Mostly, I would say 99% are Russian speakers. I can do it in Georgian. I can do it in English, but there are enough English-speaking tour guides without me -- or besides me -- and Georgians are not coming here very often.

LE: Understood. So there are two parts to my next question. A) What do you like about Boston so much? and B) how did you integrate into Boston? What would you do to become a part of the city once you got here?

A: Well, first of all, it's the right size. It's not as crazy big as New York or Moscow or whatever, and it's not too small. So it's comparable to Tbilisi. Of course, it's bigger than Tbilisi. But the feel is more or less the same. It's big enough, but at the same time not crazy. The cultural aspect of the city or the universities' theaters, Boston Symphony Orchestra. We're really, really lucky that we have this opportunity, and I do use it. I try to go there as soon as often as I can. All the museums, all the... you know, cultural opportunities, that's really important.

The only thing I would change a little bit -- tweak a little bit -- is the weather, but it's beyond our control. And it's getting better. Well there is... yeah, I mean... [laughter]. We're not getting that much snow lately. Maybe it's the sign of bad things happening globally, but for us, it's... at least it costs less money to shovel the snow. Big savings.

LE: Right. And then the second question was "how did you become part of Boston?" What did you do once you got here to integrate into the city itself?

A: As I mentioned, I'm a tour guide. So I study the history. I read about it constantly, and I'm really interested in what's going on in Boston, and I'm happy to share this love with the visitors. And it does work because people like the tourism. They come back and send other tourists, other friends. So I think I'm not a bad tour guide.

LE: It seems like there's no way you could be a bad tour guide. Well, that's the end of my questions. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

A: No.

LE: Thank you so much.