LE: This is Leora Eisenberg interviewing Rabbi Abraham Ashville. The date is March 11th, 2023, and this interview is taking place in person in Woodmere, New York. This interview will be recorded as an audio file and it will be, upon Rabbi Ashville's agreement, accessible publicly.

I was hoping that we could start off with some basic biographical information. When and where were you born?

AA: I was born in Kutaisi, Georgia on the 11th of February, 1964.

LE: Tell me a little bit about life in Georgia.

AA: Actually, my parents lived in Russia in Voronezh. My mother used to travel back to Georgia, where she was from, to Kutaisi, only in order to give birth. She would deliver, and a few weeks later, she would take the newborn together with her back to the family.

LE: In Georgia?

AA: Russia. So actually what I remember from Georgia is summer vacation. My parents used to travel with us, with all the children, to Georgia. Running around the streets, around my grandfather's yards, picking fruits, having a lot of fun. It was next to the Rioni River, and we made a lot of friends there as children. My grandfather used to let us invite friends to his backyard, and he would bring out food and an accordion and a little wine, even for the children. It's the Georgian thing: "come on, drink a little bit. Enjoy your lives."

I remember the synagogue in Georgia. Actually, on Shabbat, the Sabbath day, I used to go to the Main Synagogue of Rabbi Jacob Davrashvili [in Kutaisi], and all the children were sitting around the *bima*, the altar, where the rabbi used to sit and deliver lectures. It was such a beautiful scene. I also remember the holiday of *Simchat Torah*, when children lit and held candles in their hands. The candles were in pieces of bamboo decorated with flowers. We were looking forward to it. It was a beautiful event. I remember that as a child.

That's [what I remember] about Georgia in a nutshell. My grandmother used to run after us with food while we ran around on the streets. "Eat, eat, eat!" And the weather was beautiful next to the river. It was a lot of fun.

LE: But you lived mostly in Russia.

AA: Georgia was in the summers. My life in the former Soviet Union only lasted six years, because when I was six, my parents emigrated to Israel.

LE: And what year was this?

AA: 1971.

LE: Very early.

AA: Yes.

LE: Before the Yom Kippur War, even.

AA: 1971. We arrived in the middle of Passover.

LE: Okay.

AA: We went first to Vienna from Moscow, and then from there, El Al Airlines flew us to Israel.

LE: And what was in Vienna? Was that just a layover?

AA: There were no direct flights from Moscow.

LE: I see.

AA: So we went to Vienna. We spent the first *Seder* nights in Vienna.

LE: Okay.

AA: The *Sokhnut* [Jewish Agency] accepted us there, and then we came to Israel right after the *yom tov* [holiday when you must observe rules, e.g., not using electronics, traveling, etc.].

LE: Right after the first two days of *Pesach* [Passover]? Or once it was over [the first two and last two days of Passover are considered a holiday]?

AA: No, no, we spent the first two days of *Pesach* in Vienna, and then we arrived in Israel during *Chol Hamoed*, the intermediate days of Passover [when you are allowed to travel, etc.].

LE: And did you already have family in Israel by the time that you arrived there?

AA: We had no one there, only friends... the ones who sent us the visa.

LE: They were from Georgia as well?

AA: Yes, but they were... they were already living in the city of Lod. They took us in for a few days until we got something in Jerusalem. The government – the *Sokhnut* [Jewish Agency] – gave us an apartment. It was in Ir Ganim. HaNorit Street, number seven.

LE: So you even remember the address?

AA: I do, I do.

LE: And did you have refugee status?

AA: No. When we got the visa, we stayed there [in the USSR] for another year or something, until they approved it totally. We didn't know if we were leaving or not. They gave us three days' notice to leave. Otherwise, the visa would be canceled.

LE: Oh my gosh.

AA: When we went to Moscow, they really, really checked us. Thoroughly. Even the children were checked to make sure that we weren't carrying anything on us. No gold. No nothing. Everything [valuable] must stay in Russia. So if they did find something [valuable] that we were taking out of the country, they said, "you can leave it here and give it to your relatives. But it stays here." We left with nine suitcases.

LE: Wow.

AA: And 400 dollars.

LE: And that was it.

AA: That was it. Yes.

LE: And what pushed your family to leave and go to Israel in the first place? Were there other options?

AA: No. My father was listening to the rabbis all the time. If you fall in love with our religion, with its prophecies, they're talking about *Kibbuts Galuyot*, which means "coming back from exile" [literally "ingathering of exiles"]. It was a pure religion, pure Zionism, pure love for Israel. He especially wanted to live in Jerusalem.

That's the only thing. We didn't want for anything in Russia. My father used to run a beautiful textile factory, and we lived well. We had a house in Russia. We had a house in Georgia. We had no financial reason to leave Russia or Georgia because we were doing well for ourselves. As much as it was...

LE: Possible.

AA: Relatively. As much as it was possible to do well in a communist country. It wasn't so easy, but everyone found a way to do okay for themselves.

LE: But you told me on the phone that your family was one of "the eighteen."

AA: Yes, that's how it was. My grandparents lived in Georgia all this time. And, officially, we also lived in Georgia. We only used to work [in Russia]. My father was working in Russia. That's why my mother also went to deliver children in Georgia; in Russia, they probably wouldn't let us go and do whatever we would need to do in Georgia. So, when my grandfather applied [for a visa]... Actually, before we applied, they smuggled a letter to the United Nations that was read on the podium by Golda Meir.

LE: Tell us more about this letter.

AA: This letter was designed by 18 families. And these 18 families were headed by Shabtai Elashvili. He himself was from Kulashi [a majority-Jewish town in Georgia], and he organized a few families. They were very gutsy.

LE: What year was this?

AA: In 1969, I think. They drafted this letter, and it was supposed to be given to the Dutch ambassador or a different diplomat from there. So a few times, some members of this 18-family group flew to Russia to meet someone from a Jewish organization, but I don't remember the name. They gave them precise instructions on how to give this letter to the diplomat – or to the ambassador. I don't know exactly who they gave it to, but I know that I heard the story that they went to Moscow and went right to the Dutch embassy.

LE: Yes.

AA: And they knew exactly how the police officer went up and down the streets. He was patrolling, but they found the right time to run into the embassy.

LE: Wow.

AA: It was a big risk. So they ran in! They couldn't go in there! So they gave the letter to anyone who could hand it to the ambassador, and that letter reached Golda Meir. And she read this letter to the world.

LE: Written by 18 Georgian-Jewish families.

AA: Yes, with signed names and signatures.

LE: And this letter is in Russian, right? It's not in Georgian.

AA: Right, that's true. Golda Meir read this letter to the United Nations, and it had a huge resonance throughout the world. Then we got contacted by the officials.

LE: Soviet officials.

AA: Yes. They said, "Are you really behind it?" You can't deny it; your name is there, your signature's there. So yes.

LE: And what was so provocative about this letter?

AA: They [the officials] started to ask questions. "So what's wrong with our country? Aren't you happy?" And we said that we are happy and everything, but it's just our religion that makes us want to go to our land. "This is our fathers' land."

LE: Right.

AA: "And we don't see anything wrong with that. Give us the freedom to do that." And actually, they didn't have a choice because the world already knew about it. So they granted us [an exit visa], but it took two more years after that. So we were the ones who got visas first.

LE: Yes.

AA: When the letter went out, it was a big thing. You know, we believe... the 18 families believe that we were actually the first ones to cause the Russians to lift the Iron Curtain.

LE: Really?

AA: Of course. You know Anatolii Sharansky. He was an *asir tsion* [prisoner of Zion]. He was in jail for that [his Zionist advocacy in the Soviet Union], but we did so much more and… after us, there was a huge wave of Jews who left Russia.

LE: So yours is one of the first families to leave Georgia.

AA: Of course. In 1969, very few – maybe like 2-3 – families had left. And they didn't have much of an impact, so the authorities didn't really care. But when this letter became famous around the world, they were very much against it. But they didn't have a choice. On the other hand, we were afraid because they started to... they took Shabtai Elashvili for interrogation. They asked, "What are you doing? We don't like what you're doing." [Elashvili] says, "Listen. I'm not against you. It's just… my religion. What do you want from us? Leave us alone. Give us freedom. That's all. You're very good, but we want our land. Let us go." So they did not have much of a choice, and it happened. They let a lot of Jews go.

LE: And did you go to Israel together with any other families from this 18?

AA: All the 18 families came together on one airplane.

LE: In 1971.

AA: Yes.

LE: Oh my gosh, really?

AA: We were the first ones to be let out. I remember the goodbyes not only from the Jewish people there, but also from non-Jews. The truth is that a lot of people [of different religions] were very close friends, so there was not as much anti-Semitism as in other countries. Georgia was a little bit more moderate. Only if you wanted to get to a very high position did they [the authorities] tell you that you'd be in the background [of farewells like this].

LE Yes.

AA: It's not going to be possible because Moscow will not approve it.

LE: I see.

AA: But the neighbors themselves, more or less, were really, really good. They came to say goodbye, and they were crying. Would we ever see each other again? Actually, a few years ago, I got the chance to go and visit my house back in Kutaisi.

LE: Really?

AA: Yeah, it's S**** Street, number 5. I knocked on the gates, and a lady opened the door. I had a driver. She looked at me, and my face was not familiar. I don't look Georgian. So I say in Georgian, "*gamarjoba* [hello].” So she says, "Who might you be?" "I am... I am... the boy that grew up in this house. And after 44 years, I'm coming to claim my house back."

LE: Oh my gosh.

AA: I was just joking. But we used to live there. I only remembered the driveway and the garage that my father built specially for his car. If you remember, the most prestigious car in Russia was a Volga.

LE: Volga, yes.

AA: So my father... he couldn't show it in Russian areas. But in Georgia, nobody cared so much. So he bought the Volga and always kept it in Georgia. When he came to Georgia, he enjoyed his car there. So all these things came back to me.

LE: Yes.

AA: So she invited me in. I didn't go in, but... she was shocked. Like, “wow, it's unbelievable.” And then someone came out from the house across the street, from house number six. And this was my grandfather's house. The guy was 54 years old then, and he told me that he remembered my grandfather.

LE: Wow.

AA: Yes, his mother came out. Oh, there was such a big thing! "We remember him! We bought the house from him!" And it was amazing. Yeah, this is what I remember from Georgia.

LE: But then you went to Israel, and now you're here in New York. So what happened there? How did you get from Israel to New York?

AA: So I always wondered how we -- the 18 families that risked so much, our security... we thought that the Russians would not tolerate this, that we'd go to jail or something… This was it; we signed already. It was smart or stupid. It didn't matter: we were in it.

LE: Okay.

A: Let me tell you a funny story. When El Al Airlines came to Vienna and we boarded the airplane, my grandfather was very suspicious. He saw blonde girls with blue eyes and mini-skirts. That was what the stewardesses of those times looked like. My grandfather tells everybody, the Georgians, "she doesn't look Jewish. She's German. We are being abducted by Germans." [laughter] He says, "oy vey, the Germans. We left the Russians. And now the Germans took us. Fascists!”

It was so... but we were children; we were scared. We started to cry. The women started to cry. So the co-pilot comes out and spoke in Hebrew. And he says, "*shalom aleichem*." "*Heveinu shalom aleichem* [sings and claps]." [This is a line from a popular Jewish folk song.] When they started to sing that, he said, "*baruch HaShem* [thank God], we are in good hands." [laughter] My grandfather was 63 then.

I remember that. Shabtai Elashvili is really the one who organized the whole thing. He was not... He didn't get to touch the ground of Israel. He was brought down on a stretcher. He was alive. He was in the hospital for six weeks, and then he passed away.

LE: Oh, so he never even got off the plane... was he ill?

AA: He was ill.

LE: Oh, I'm sorry.

AA: He was sick, and he passed away after, but he was conscious. Yes, he was brought down for that. I remember my grandfather going down to the ground and kissing it... And we came with our own *Sefer Torah* [Torah scroll], by the way.

LE: Really?

AA: Yes. They let us take it out of the USSR because my father had spent so much money to get the permissions for it. A few other families also brought their own *Sefer Torahs* [Torah scrolls].

LE: Ah, so several *Sefer Torahs* were on the plane.

AA: Yes, we came down from there... there are pictures of it. Unfortunately, I don't have these pictures, but they walked down the steps from the airplane with their Torah scrolls. Yes, really, in the airport! I remember this beautiful sight. People met us, government officials met us, and...

LE: Amazing.

AA: There was.... singing and dancing right there. It was like *Simchat Torah* [Jewish holiday commemorating God giving the Torah at Mt. Sinai], the dedication of the Torah. [It is customary to dance on this holiday.] It was beautiful, beautiful.

LE: And how long were you in Israel for?

AA: Nine years.

LE: Short time.

AA: Short time, but I grew up and was formed there as a child. I was already 16. I went to elementary school and yeshiva. My parents left because my father visited America, and he saw the [Hasidic] Lubavitcher community... the *hasidish* [Hasidic]...

LE: What year did he visit America?

AA: In 1970.

LE: Oh, so very soon after you came.

AA: Yes, and he actually started to import some electronics from the United States to Israel.

LE Yes.

AA: And every time that he came to America, he would go to the Lubavitcher Rebbe's synagogue.

LE: I see.

AA: And he fell in love with the *hasidish* Rebbe, especially since he was a Russian-speaking person. [AA is referring here to the Chabad Lubavitcher rabbi – often referred to as "the Rebbe" – Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He spearheaded the Chabad movement, which has representatives all across the world.] And he saw him once and asked if he may come to live here, because he really does not find himself like financially to be... he had financial difficulties in Israel. And the Rebbe told him, "okay. You are welcome. You can come." So he came here four months later, once summer vacation started. We, the children, followed right away.

LE: What year was this?

AA: 1980. On August 24th, we arrived here in the United States. Four months later, we already had green cards. And we started our lives here.

LE: Wow. Was there already a Georgian-Jewish community by the time that you came?

AA: Yes, actually, the first Georgian Jews came to hUnited States in 1975, to Philadelphia.

LE: Wow.

AA: Do you know what their last name was? Israelashvili.

LE: A good Jewish last name.

AA: Yes. And they came first to Israel, actually.

LE: Really?

AA: Unfortunately… There's a joke. "What was the last name of the first Georgian Jews who left Israel?" "Israelobashvili." [Literally, "Israel is not for me" in Hebrew.]

LE: "Oh, Israel's not for me." [laughter] And did you go directly to New York when you came from Israel?

AA: We came directly to New York, to Crown Heights.

LE: Crown Heights? Not to Rego Park?

AA: We went to Crown Heights in order to be with Chabad. [Crown Heights is the center of the Chabad movement.]

LE: Was it hard? Did you face any challenges when you came?

AA: Oh, we did. My father had a language barrier. And my twin brother Isaac and I went to Miri Yeshiva. We saw that the situation was not so good because our father was supposed to pay rent. We were very young then, but we overheard that our father was struggling and getting some kind of loans from his friends. From Rego Park friends.

LE: Georgian-Jewish...

AA: There were already about a hundred families In Rego Park.

LE: And did your family know them from Georgia?

AA: No, actually my father knew them from his visits to the United States over the years. And one family invited my parents for *Pesach* [Passover] to Rego Park. And he made some friends. So those friends tried to help him out a little bit until he established himself here. And then when we came here and felt that the situation was a little tight, we left the yeshiva and went to work in a matzah bakery. I was 17 years old then.

LE: Wow, okay.

AA: I was a supervisor, like a *mashgiach* [rabbinical supervisor for kashruth].

LE: Like Streit's, or...?

AA: No, in Schatzer Matzas. You know Schatzer?

LE: Yes. So you made *shmurah matza* [handmade round matza]? [Schatzer Matzas specializes in this kind of matza.]

AA: Yes, right. We used to work there. And slowly but surely, we opened up a nice business in Brooklyn. It was a nice fruit store. We took it over from someone. And we actually started to live. So we actually settled in the United States. We worked. I've been working since I was 17.

LE: Wow.

AA: And then when I was 18, I was invited to help the community here in Queens because they didn't have a rabbi. They opened up a small... they bought a small one-family house and opened up a synagogue. And they knew that I had a good voice, and I know a little bit about *hazanut* [cantorial work], being a *hazan*, a cantor, and rabbi. And they asked my father if I could

go and help them. My father was the one who made the decisions. That's a Georgian family – the father makes the decisions. So my father asked me, "what do you think about it?" I said, "okay, if it's only for one year, why not? I will help." I love singing, and I loved this idea.

LE: Did the community have another rabbi at the time?

AA: No. There was only one rabbi who came from Israel just to help establish the community, and then they needed someone on a daily basis. I started off there thinking that it would be for one year. And I've already been there for 40 years.

LE: Wow. What is your job like as the rabbi of the Congregation of Georgian Jews?

AA: Everything. I'm the cantor, the *hazan*. Daily prayers, daily lectures. Morning and evening. Sabbath, of course. Holidays. All the wedding ceremonies are my responsibility. Unfortunately, the funerals are also my responsibility. And I'm there for anyone who has a question or needs guidance. I'm a full-time rabbi.

LE: Wow.

AA: Yes. It will be 40 years on August 22nd of this year.

LE: Congratulations.

AA: Thank you so much.

LE: How has the community changed over the time that you've been the rabbi?

AA: We started with 130 people. In March 18th, 1982, we opened the synagogue, the one-family house. In 1990, we demolished that house and erected a beautiful, beautiful building. In a year and a half, it was already built! Then we had about 750 families.

LE: Wow. 750 families!

AA: I still have the listing.

LE: Oh my gosh.

AA: But over the years… since 2000, people have migrated to different states, usually neighboring ones, like New Jersey. People moved a little far away. Long Island, Manhattan. Because the young generation had already integrated into American culture and society, they had good jobs and made good money. Queens was too small for them.

LE: Right.

AA: So they started to disperse all over. Now I can say that we have about 350 families around Rego Park and Forest Hills. Many of them are... the community is not so young because the young ones moved away. And our *shul* [synagogue] is doing okay. We have services every day, but I see slowly that we are deteriorating, unfortunately.

LE: Right.

AA: Many people move, and then they go to different synagogues. So this community is actually like the Ashkenazi community in Rego Park and Forest Hills. They [used to] ha[ve] very beautiful synagogues, Ashkenazi synagogues, and they simply are not there anymore. Whole synagogues are being run now by Bukharian Jews because they came to the area over the years. Nowadays, there are about 70,000 Bukharian Jews in Forest Hills, Rego Park, Briarwood, Main Street in Queens…

LE: And how many Georgian Jews are there in the area?

AA: Maybe two thousand.

LE: Far fewer. It's not even comparable.

AA: Of course. You can't compare. Even my *shul* [synagogue] right now is half-Georgians, half-Bukharians.

LE: Really?

AA: Yes. So this is their time. The Georgians -- I sense, as a rabbi -- don't connect very well to the Bukharian culture. And they are kind of running away.

LE: I see.

AA: They go more to Manhasset or Roslyn in order to go to Chabad synagogues. And that's... that's the situation. Even their rabbi moved to Woodmere. [Laughter.] Why should you be surprised if my people are moving, you know?

LE: Yes. But services are in Georgian, no?

AA: Services are. Lectures are mostly in Georgian.

LE: Lectures are in Georgian.

AA: But we also have youth *minyan* [prayer group]. And we provide fully English-language services there. Everything is conducted in English, except for *davenings* [prayer services] or *tfilot* [prayers]. But in my *shul* [synagogue], I would say that it's 75% Georgian and 25% English.

LE: Okay.

AA: Because people are still asking to speak a little bit of English, too – to put in an English word here, an English word there, because there are some people who don't understand Georgian.

LE: You lead things in Georgian, though.

AA: I lead things in Georgian and in English.

LE: Wow.

AA: Yes.

LE: Do you feel connected to Georgia after all these years?

AA: I became more connected to Georgia. I actually learned the language here, because the only Georgian I knew was from when I came here as a child. I wasn't even 18. The Georgian I knew was a basic, provincial language. Nothing from Tbilisi.

LE: Sure.

AA: I didn't have any education. So I only knew what I heard at home: just low-level Georgian. But here… I used to put out a weekly bulletin with some information about the upcoming holidays, Shabbat, a little about the Torah portion we were going to read on Shabbat. And I started to write it in Georgian.

LE: I heard your wife helped you with that.

AA: Yeah, that's true. It was called *Torah Or*, the light of Torah. And after a little while, a person who used to run a television show in Georgia, a Georgian Jew by the name of Otar Sepiashvili – he also wrote a book and ran a show called *Illuzion* in Tbilisi, in Georgia – came here and had nothing to do. I offered him to help me put out this beautiful thing. So when he saw the language I'm writing in, he said, "oy vey, this is the most unrefined language! How could you write this?" So he took over: I used to type, and he would tell me the words. And I learned so much from him. Real, proper Georgian.

LE: Right.

AA: I was invited five years ago by the Georgian government. They celebrated 26 centuries of [Jewish] friendship with Georgia. I spoke there in front of officials.

LE: Yes.

AA: And they were surprised. I mean, a boy that left when he was five or six years old and speaks so properly. It's amazing. So I told them that it's because of Mr. Otar Sepiashvili. We did it for 10 years, the *Torah Or*. For 10 years we put out the *Torah Or.* She [points to his wife] was the chief editor; she didn't just point out my spelling mistakes.

LE: Yes.

AA: She helped us so much in this, and after a while, we stopped doing it.

LE: Okay. And you've been back to Georgia. You said you were there recently just...

AA: Yes, I visited twice actually after that.

LE: Wow.

AA: After we left Georgia, after 44 years, I visited once, and then again after 46 years [of not living in Georgia].

LE: I've asked all of my questions. Is there anything you want to add?

AA: What am I going to add? Our community is beautiful. There is a lot of diversity... [wife prompts him: "tell the story about the *Sefer Torahs*."] In 1953, I think, the Soviets – the Communists – wanted to turn every synagogue into a museum, a library. There was a story about when they wanted to close and demolish the *shuls*, people made a human chain around one of them in Georgia. "It's going to be over our dead bodies."

I think the Georgians were not so strict with Georgian Jews because Stalin was Georgian originally, so I think he overlooked... he made our life... "Don't bother the Jews so much because this is my land." So we enjoyed that partial freedom. We always had kosher meat. We had those who slaughtered the meat according to Jewish law. We had rabbis, we had *mohalim* – those who performed circumcision. The Georgians were pretty, pretty okay.

LE: Yes.

AA: We were able to go to the synagogues and gather and pray. The only thing that was not allowed was giving Torah lectures.

LE: Okay.

AA: But we still gave them. And I remember... the children used to go into hiding to the rabbi's house. Sometimes, the rabbis would disguise themselves in women's clothes to go privately to people's houses and teach their children Torah and the *aleph-bet* [Hebrew alphabet]. These were tough times, but not as tough as in Russia. When we used to live in Voronezh, my mother used to light the *Shabbos* [Sabbath] candles, and we did it in hiding because they would sometimes come and check on us. You understand?

LE: Because they knew you were Georgian Jews?

AA: No, they did not know we were Jews, but they had some kind of... suspicion.

LE: Yes.

AA: So I remember a guy by the name of Vova. He was a KGB agent, like a spy. He used to come and visit on the Sabbath to see what we were doing.

LE: Yes.

AA: They probably knew, but they didn't bother us. My father was a really, really good worker. He made that factory very successful, and they probably overlooked things on purpose.

LE: Right.

AA: But before we left, they told my father… they wrote him a letter.

LE: The KGB?

AA: No, not the KGB. The factory.

LE: Oh, the factory, okay.

AA: And they said, "if you haven't left yet, you can still come back." Because he left the factory. He was a *nachal'nik*. You know what a *nachal'nik* is?

LE: A manager.

AA: Yes. So he left the factory, and he went back to Georgia because he heard that we got a visa.

LE: Yes.

AA: And he thought that once we got a visa, we would probably leave in a month or two. It took a lot of time, and he got a letter from the factory saying that "if you want to come back, we know that you haven't left yet. You can come back. You're more than welcome." And then the second time [we received a visit from the authorities], it was already serious. My father had two visitors from... They didn't say they were from the KGB, but, you know, it was the secret police.

LE: Okay, the secret police. [laughter]

AA: His name was Edik in Russian. "So tell us why you're leaving." "Listen, this is our country. I want to go." You know what he says? "We have no problem with you. You're a good guy. We've been watching you all these years."

LE: Yes.

AA: "You did not start with girls. Those people before you…" They saw that women were working for them, and the male managers were not controlling their hands and touching them. "You came with your wife. You are a good guy. Clean guy. You're not a drinker. We know that you made a little money from here. But it's okay. So just leave." And really, they were pretty fair to my father.

LE: Wow.

AA: "But we know everything."

LE: Wow.

AA: "So you're... you're free to go." Yes, really, my father thought, "oy vey."

LE: That's so funny.

AA: There's a joke. There's a joke about a guy named Avraham who wants to leave the USSR. He got the visa and everything. He wants to leave. The KGB knocks on the door at two o'clock in the morning, hard knocks. Before Avraham opens the door, he says, "who is this?" "The mailman." He opened up the door. So they came in, three KGB guys. They say, "Avraham, why are you leaving? You don't feel good about it? You know, we haven't done anything wrong to you... [but] you leave."

"No, nothing. It's just that it's my... my land. My fathers'. This is the Promised Land. You know, I'm Jewish. I'd like to be there. And everything is fine. The only thing is that in Israel, mailmen don't knock on the door at 2 o'clock in the morning." [laughter] "This is also one of the reasons why I'm leaving."

LE: That's so funny.

AA: Yes. So in Georgia, we have a huge history. I'm sure you know about it. The 26 centuries of living in Georgia, the first immigration from *Yerushalayim* [Jerusalem]. That you don't need from me. So what else can I tell you?

LE: I'm curious to hear more about the *shul* and the life of the Georgian-Jewish community today.

AA: Today, *Baruch Hashem* [thank God], we have many, many intellectuals. We have more than 120 doctors in the community. The young generation is very entrepreneurial, *Baruch Hashem*, and we're doing well financially, but spiritually, I think we're a little down, because the ones who established and founded the shul were less intellectual and more religious.

LE: Who were the people who founded the shul?

AA: We're talking about 40 years ago. Most of them are not around anymore, but their children are. The biggest were the Israelashvili family, Elashvili family, and Botelashvili family. These are the major families that founded the shul, and, *Baruch Hashem*, it's still functioning. But again, the spiritual level, unfortunately… I feel it's a little down because people have gotten more educated. And education is secular, so the innocence of those believing in Torah and religion blindly is not around anymore. Do you understand?

LE: Yes.

AA: But the intellectuals – they listen to me, and I need to upgrade my lectures so that they don't ask, "what is he talking about?" You know what I mean?

LE: Yes.

AA: So *Baruch Hashem*, I'm keeping up. You have to be competent in everything. We have a nice community, but I think people are still running away – first of all because the area that we live in is not so prestigious anymore.

LE: Rego Park?

AA: Rego Park and Forest Hills used to be... Jewish life was flourishing. Now, they think that it's not flourishing so much. They are moving to different communities. Some of them, the children, say that "it's enough already with the Georgian. We hear Georgian, Georgian, Georgian." The old people are still around, some of them. They don't understand English.

LE: Right.

AA: And I have to speak Georgian for them. And the young people say, "I don't want to be around. I feel like an American Jew. I'm already Americanized, and I would like my shul to be like a Young Israel [modern Orthodox] shul." Which it's not.

LE: Right.

AA: Unfortunately. So this is it. Maybe it's going to last for another 10 years. And then... I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe we'll go back to Israel. I don't know.

But that's about it. I mean… It's not the same. Two hundred... we have 245 seats downstairs and 145 seats upstairs. So about 500 people would come. Even now, on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, the synagogue is full. But people got old. Some of them became less religious. Whoever became more religious, they decided to move to other shuls which are more religious. We run an Orthodox shul, and nothing is Conservative or Reform in our *shul*, but some people don't like it so much. So this is the situation.

LE: Wow.

AA: Yes. The Bukharian community is very strong because there are so many of them... not that all of them are religious, but even if the population is 10% religious, you need already 50 *shuls*.

LE: Right.

AA: You understand? If all the 70,000 people were religious, they would need 700 *shuls*!

LE: Yes.

AA: So they have about 30-40 *shuls*. And the Georgian shul was – from the very beginning – the one and only [Georgian] synagogue in North America. From 1982 till now. And *Baruch Hashem*, it's still alive and kicking.

LE: Wow.

AA: So we'll see. Hopefully, it's going to... I was thinking about it. You know, I don't mind. Bukharian Jews also come to the synagogue, and if the synagogue population transforms… becomes majority-Bukharian... They also like me very much. I don't have a problem with continuing to be the rabbi.

LE Yes.

AA: But it's not going to be a Georgian synagogue anymore, unfortunately. But I believe that... maybe we will make a huge turnaround. Because there are enough Georgian families there. 350 families.

LE: That's a lot of families.

AA: It's a lot, but they're probably not as religious as I want them to be. But listen, we're living in free times and in a free country. People do what they want to do.

LE: Right.

AA: That's about it.

LE: Thank you very much, Rabbi Ashville.

AA: Thank you very much for interviewing me.

LE: Of course, of course.

AA: And if you have any questions in the future, anytime.

LE: I will.