Maia Araviashvili's Interview with Lika Sirelson, Head of the Georgian Cultural Center "Dancing Crane Company" March 23, 2023, New York, United States

Interviewer: – Greetings! Today, our interview guest is Ms. Lika Sirelson, who runs a Sunday school that offers various services and activities for Georgian emigrants.
Welcome, Ms. Lika! Please introduce yourself and briefly share your biographical details—when and where were you born?

Respondent: – Hello! My name is Lika Bakhturidze-Sirelson. I was born in 1961 in Tbilisi. I have been living in America for 27 years now. My story—my life story in America—is quite interesting, at least for me (smiles). It was completely by chance that I came here. I met a man, Victor Sirelson. Back then, very few Georgians were here, almost none. A friend told me that there was a concert featuring Georgian dances and songs, and I was amazed. Just imagine—it was such a long time ago, and very few people even knew what Georgia was. So, I was eager to...

Interviewer: – Just to clarify, which year was this?

Respondent: – That was in... 1998.

Interviewer: – So, you arrived in America in 1998?

Respondent: – No, 1998 was the year I found out about the concert. I was very interested because back then, anything Georgian was extremely rare. There was a deep sense of longing. So, I went to the concert and met Mr. Victor Sirelson. I want to emphasize this moment because it marked the beginning of everything. There were only two Georgians in the audience, and one more on stage—everyone else, both in the audience and on stage, was American. The dancers, except for that one Georgian, were all Americans, yet they were performing our traditional Georgian dances. It was Victor Sirelson who laid the foundation for this. He later became my husband, and we have been working together on this Georgian „work" (ქართული საქმე) for many years. He was the one who started it all. This was the first Georgian cultural center, which he founded. His interest in Georgian culture dates back to 1964 when he traveled to Soviet Union countries as an outstanding student. That was when he first saw Georgia. If you're interested, I can share how his connection with Georgian art began. During their journey, these students were traveling from Moscow to Tbilisi by train when he overheard Georgian singing. He approached the open compartment where the singers were and stood there listening. The Georgians invited him to join them. At the time, he didn't know who they were, but he was so captivated by their singing that

he accepted their invitation. He often recalls how they offered him food—an eggplant and meat dish—and the song they were singing was *Chakrulo.* So, our organization and my journey in America are closely tied to that *Chakrulo* and that very moment.

Interviewer: – Before we delve into your emigration to America, could you reflect on your life in Georgia? Where did you study? When did you decide to move to America, and what motivated your decision?

Respondent: – Well… I lost my parents at a young age, and my life had its hardships. It's painful for me to talk about it, but I'll share what I can. I mainly worked at the Polytechnic Institute—GEPI, the well-known GEPI. There was also a theater studio, a public theater called *Modi Nakhe* (Come and See), led by Mr. Nugzar Butskhrikidze. I was involved in that theater and performed there. That theater opened many doors for us—we traveled on tour to many countries worldwide, including America. We visited the U.S. three times, as well as England, Japan, Germany, Finland—so many places.

In Georgia, I was an engineer by profession. Later, a theater faculty was opened, where teachers from the Theater Institute were brought in. I studied there as well because I had always been interested in theater. My family wanted me to become a doctor, but I didn't want to pursue medicine. That's how I ended up at GEPI [Georgian Technical University] (laughs). But in the end, I still followed my passion—I completed my studies and even directed *Hamlet* as my diploma project, which was very well received.

As for my personal life, it was quite painful. My sister raised me. I always had the opportunity, thank God, to support myself because I was also teaching and doing other things. But for my family, I decided that it would be good to come to America and help them. And it was something incredible—I arrived, and three months later, we created... (silence)... well, three months later, I got married. Yes, we started a family three months after I arrived. So, how many years has it been now? I've lost track already. How many years have passed since '98? (smiles)

Interviewer: - Since '98, it's been...

Respondent: - Yeah, well, however much time has passed… (silence)

Interviewer: - 25 years have passed.

Respondent: - Yes, 25. I get confused, I haven't been here for 27 years, it's been 25 years. Yes, I arrived 25 years ago (smiles). Ah... and three months later, we started our family. It's strange, isn't it? No one here believed it, that after just three months, things would happen so quickly. They thought it was just for documents or something. But we've been together for 25 years. Well, life happens. Maybe two lonely people met each other, and we've lived together all these years. Believe it or not, we have never argued.

Interviewer: - That’s wonderful, to have such a harmonious life together for so many years. When you think back to your arrival, what do you remember? You mentioned missing Georgian culture, and when you heard about a concert, you eagerly went and attended it, where you met your future husband, right? What else do you recall from when you first arrived? Was it stressful? What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome them?

Respondent: - Umm, you know, before coming to live here, I had already visited the country. But back then, I was a guest, performing on stage, part of a tour. So, I had seen certain aspects of the U.S., interesting things, but this was a completely different side of America. When I arrived and started a family, the country gradually opened up to me in a new way. And the most fascinating thing for someone my age—I am now turning 63 years old, and for someone my age, it is interesting to understand what freedom means—what personal freedom really is. Can it be learned? Or is it something that cannot be taught?

Let me tell you something. I grew up in a time when there were congresses, elections, and such events. And I remember very well—very clearly, in fact—that out of about 4,000 people attending a congress, every single one of them supported absolutely everything that was decided there.

I found it fascinating. There was a political figure—I don’t recall the name, to be honest—who was being discussed during local elections. My American friends were talking about it, and do you know how they were debating? They were discussing it in a way that, if I were to draw a parallel, it was similar to how parents deliberate about where their child should go and what choices they should make. Meaning, they had the power to make that decision, just like parents decide for their children. They were speaking with exactly that kind of attitude—whether this person should be elected or not, how things should be handled, and so on.

For me, this was astonishing—do you understand? And I cannot claim with certainty—of course, we all love our homeland. I have loved it passionately, I love it now, and I always will. But I was never the kind of person with a fighting spirit, you see? I supported the movements of my time that were good for Georgia, but I didn't know how to think about the tools needed to create a better, freer Georgia. I just didn't know those tools.

Now, working with young people here, I see how free this new generation is, and I like it. It makes me happy. Even now, I don't feel entirely free myself, you know? Because I think a person needs to have this awareness from childhood—to understand what true freedom is, consciously and responsibly. Not just the superficial idea, like "Oh, I’ll wear ripped jeans, so I'm free." That’s not real freedom. The kind of inner freedom a person should have—I don’t have it completely. But I appreciate it, and I’ve learned about it here in America.

I’ve also learned that if you work hard and love what you do, it truly matters—it guarantees a better future. This was new to me. In my previous life, you could work hard, put in sleepless nights, and it might not mean anything. But here, if you fight correctly—within legal boundaries—you should have hope, and you can achieve what you strive for.

One more thing I want to say: Despite never being an empty person, always being close to literature and the classics, I have learned so much here—from this country and from my husband, Victor. I

have come to understand the value of simplicity. I deeply respect this realization. Simplicity—it holds true intelligence, education, forgiveness, and everything meaningful. Everything real should come from simplicity (უბრალოება). This is what I believe, though maybe I'm wrong. But this is how I see and feel it, my dear.

Interviewer: - Did you initially arrive in New York?

Respondent: - Yes, yes.

Interviewer: - Why did you choose this city? Did you have friends here, or was there another reason?

Respondent: - Yes, yes, I had a friend here. A Georgian friend who had moved here a long time ago.

Interviewer: - A Georgian?

Respondent: - Yes, yes, a Georgian. I came to stay with them, but honestly, I had no plans to remain here. You see, I originally intended to stay for just one year. This wasn't connected to my long-term goals. I had previously worked in Israel for a year to support my family financially, and I planned to do something similar here. But then, I started a family, and my perspective on this country changed completely. When you have a family somewhere, your feelings about that place transform.

Interviewer: - The decision to open a dance and cultural academy—was that mainly your husband's idea? Did you decide on it together? How did you discuss it?

Respondent: - Oh, I love this question! Thank you. This center was not founded by me—it already existed. It was founded by Victor in 1996, before I was even in America. He had been searching for information about Georgian culture since 1964. He is a highly educated person—he completed three universities, taught at Columbia University for a while, is a mathematician, and also studied full course of folklore.
He was always interested in Georgian culture, but at that time, there was absolutely nothing available in the U.S. He reached out to the Georgian diaspora here, and they helped him find some materials, though very little. Over the years, we have collected old records—some so rare that they might not even exist in the archives in Georgia anymore! (smiles)
Later, Victor found choreographer Merab Tsereteli, and together, they established this center. It began as a dance ensemble, and interestingly, the first dancers were all Americans, including soloists from the City Ballet. Their first performance was remarkable—they didn't have traditional Georgian costumes, so they danced in black skirts and tops. But what touched me the most was

their love for what they were doing. Of course, they couldn't dance like Georgians who start learning from childhood, but their passion was incredible.
I found an old video of Victor and Merab before a concert. They were standing on stage in Warwick, Upstate New York, in front of 400 students and parents. Victor was holding a cane and a globe, with Georgian folk music playing in the background. He told the audience, "There is a country called Georgia, with a long history, rich traditions, and unique culture. Its people are hardworking, kind, and beautiful."
For me, as a Georgian, seeing that was so touching. At that time, I wasn't accustomed to seeing so many cultural centers and so much respect for my country abroad. It meant a lot to me.

Interviewer: - Do you know how Victor and Merab met? Your husband left Georgia in 1964, so did he already have the idea of visiting Georgia back then?

Respondent: - No, no. A mutual Georgian friend, who knew both of them, introduced them here in the U.S. Victor was looking for a dancer, and that's how they met.

Interviewer: - So, Merab hadn't moved from Georgia yet when Victor got interested in Georgian dance?

Respondent: - No, no. They met here. A Georgian friend introduced them. What was your other question? Ah... yes, how they met..

Interviewer: - How was it in Georgia…

Respondent: - Oh, you know what? They absolutely didn't… they didn't have much information about it at that time. The first exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States took place in 1964. It was the very first student exchange for travel purposes. They selected 15 top students from American universities and 15 from various universities in the Soviet Union, then sent them on an exchange program with a set itinerary. The itinerary was determined by the Soviet Union, not by the students themselves. They traveled to Moscow, Leningrad, Baku, Tbilisi (which was one of the destinations), and Kyiv—those were the cities they visited. Back then, our creative work was perceived very differently.
You know, I have many American friends, and over the years, I've seen how much they love Georgian dance and music. Later, as we grew, we had professional singers and dancers join us, but I will never forget those early years when our performances were exclusively for American audiences. We performed because there weren't even Georgian audiences back then. The whole purpose of the company was to promote Georgia. Before every concert or performance, Victor would come out dressed in a chokha (traditional Georgian attire) and tell the audience where Georgia was. At that time, people didn't even know such a country existed—geographically, historically… He would often tell stories, like the famous myth about how God distributed land

among nations and how Georgians received their portion... (smiles). I even have videos of these moments.

We also had a women's trio called "Magnolia," and when they sang in Georgian, the audience had no idea what the lyrics were about, yet I've seen American audiences cry. I can't even describe it—it was something I witnessed myself. After concerts, Victor and the performers would meet with the audience and answer their questions. Victor would always answer their questions, and they had a lot—about Georgia, its history, songs, culture, religion… They would ask, "What is the dominant religion in this country?" and many other things.

This whole endeavor was on such a large scale—hundreds, thousands of concerts were held by our company. I was just a part of it. I joined later. Victor started it, and I came in afterward, contributing in whatever way I could. Then, gradually, more Georgians started coming. This happened naturally, and almost every artist who arrived in that period had some connection with us.

Over time, the mission changed. More and more Georgian children were born here. Before that, there were hardly any, and it became clear that preserving Georgian identity wasn't just about dance or song but about being Georgian itself. If you're not close to your literature, art, music, and traditions, just speaking Georgian or having a Georgian surname won't make you truly Georgian. It takes years to develop that sense of belonging. And of course, I wouldn't take full credit for this—cultural centers like ours played a role, but parents were just as important. If parents don't have an interest in preserving their heritage, there's only so much we can do.

Over time, people started recognizing Georgia as a country. Now, things are completely different—Georgia is open, there are many tourists. But when we started, most people had no idea where Georgia was or even that it existed. You know how geography is in America… (smiles).

Eventually, we expanded from just promoting Georgian culture to offering classes for children. Our ensemble included Georgians, and then we managed to establish dance and singing classes for children. Now we have so many programs. On top of that, we created the New York Georgian Theater. I had been thinking about this for a long time because theater is the most difficult of all art forms. I wanted to establish it, but I worried about forming a cast, about finding actors… I thought, maybe they don't have to be professional actors but just talented enough to make it work. But ultimately, it has to be something the audience accepts, right?

Then I came up with the idea. We had a group of women but no male actors. So I adapted Otia Ioseliani's play *"Six Old Maids/Spinsters and One Man."* (ექვსი შინაბერა და ერთი კაცი) Otia himself gave us permission, and we modernized it a bit. Now, you are younger than me, but when I was young, there was this character, the secretary of the district committee… I completely changed everything about the play. Later, my close friends Tsutsa Kapanadze and Khatuna Ioseliani joined us. Ioseliani joined a bit later, but we started working together. We staged *"Six Old Maids/Spinsters and One Man"* in 2008—remember what a difficult time that was? We would go to protests at the UN, sign petitions, and then… We weren't sure whether to go forward with the premiere. We were told, "You know what? You should go ahead—it might have the opposite effect." We listened, and we performed it.

The audience came with flags, and at the end of the show, we recited patriotic poems—we were crying on stage, and the audience was crying in the hall. I will never forget that day for the rest of my life. I am incredibly grateful to Victor because none of this would have been possible without him. He covered all the expenses for the venue and even provided small payments to the actors—$300 each. It's not much, but it was something.

I will always be grateful to him—not just as his wife, but as a simple Georgian who saw firsthand how sincerely and selflessly he did all this, with no ambitions for personal gain. I remember once I was upset about something, and he told me, "I don't do this to gain anything—I do it because I love it. On the contrary, I am grateful that I got to discover this art, this culture." That's the story of me and Victor—so far.

Interviewer: - That's really fascinating. Can you tell us more about your daily life? Besides everything you do at the cultural center for the Georgian cause, do you work in any other field? What does your daily life look like? Who do you interact with? Do you have communication with other Georgians? What is your social circle like?

Respondent: - What do I do? Well, at first, when we started our family, I wasn't working at all. To be honest, I spent my days cleaning the house about ten times a day, redecorating, rearranging furniture, and reading books. That's how it went for a while. Then, I wanted to do something meaningful. It all happened naturally—I learned how to work with silver and gold and started making jewelry. My style is asymmetrical designs, and I ended up showcasing my work at high-end exhibitions and sales events.

I did this until COVID hit, and then I stopped because it's incredibly difficult work. I loved it, though—every piece was part of my creative expression. But I'm not good at business. For example, when someone would ask, "Can I buy this for a lower price?" I couldn't say no (smiles). I'm just not cut out to be a businesswoman.

Aside from that, I work a lot with children. We have a children's musical theater—Tsutsa teaches kids aged 3 to 7, and I teach from 7 and up. I'm also the artistic director of the New York Georgian Theater. We also have a youth ensemble. Right now, we're taking *"Sherikilebi – A Musical About Nothing"* to Germany. It's my own play.

I started writing scripts because I didn't want any child to feel left out. If you have 20 kids, assigning lead and secondary roles can be painful for them. I wanted every child to feel important, so I began writing plays where every role was a main role. Over time, I became bolder—two of my scripts even won grants!

Right now, on April 22, I am organizing a big show, and we have invited all the organizations from around here—Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. There are seven cultural centers, and we have invited them all to create a festival for children. There will be around 300 participants. And what do I personally want from this? I named this show "Khorumi is a Georgian Dance." This is what I am working on at this very moment. You know, it really pains me when competition sometimes turns into insults and bitter relationships. With this show, I want to say that "Khorumi

is a Georgian dance"—we should be united. Ambition is great, competition is great, but I want to use this show to say that we should embrace one another. We are all together, working for the Georgian cause (ქართული საქმე). It doesn't matter if I have been doing it for a long time and you have just started—what matters is that you are doing it, right? I want to emphasize that the Georgian cause (ქართული საქმე). should first and foremost be for Georgia, for Georgians, and only then for oneself.

This is something I deeply care about. I want to announce it while I can, and I hope this becomes an annual festival. It will be a charity event. This year is the first one, so not everything will be exactly as I envisioned in my project. But in the future, since I already have connections with cultural centers in Italy, the Netherlands, and other places, I want them to do something similar so that next year we can turn this into an international festival of kindness.

At the same time, I am also organizing an exhibition-sale for the children. They will paint, and we will sell their artworks, sending the money to those in need. I want these young children to feel and understand from an early age that helping someone—no, not just someone, but helping Georgians, helping their country—is something good. It's important for them to build these connections.

Now, you asked me about my personal life, but I don't have anything purely personal. Every single second and every single minute of my life is tied to this center. Even the designs I used to create in the past—everything was related to this. It was very difficult, but that phase is over. Now we have moved into a new building with a large space, which I absolutely love. And by the way (smiling), I even took up woodworking—I really did! I worked on the walls and everything, standing on a high ladder, this 62-year-old woman, doing it all because I love it. And when I love something, I feel like I can do anything. So far, thank God, it has worked out. Nobody has complained about the walls, ceilings, or anything I've built.

I always think about this—if someone were to ask me for advice, not that I consider myself a great philosopher or anything, but if a friend asked me what I would say, I would tell them: Do everything you can to work on something you love. Because if you do, you will be happy, you will be satisfied, you will make those around you happy, and you will complain less. Of course, we all have our moments of negativity, but in the grand scheme of things, if you are doing what you love, those moments pass. That's the key to happiness, in my opinion. I believe this is the essence, the guarantee of happiness.

Interviewer: Apart from the fact that you are fully dedicated to the Georgian cause here, do you still maintain connections with friends and professional circles in Georgia? Do you visit Georgia often? What currently connects you to your homeland?

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Respondent:

Okay, so… A very long time ago, when I first went to Georgia—meaning, after we got married in 1998 (recalls), maybe three or four years later, I don't remember exactly—I got my documents, and we both went for the first time. When I was leaving, there weren't many Georgians here, but

those who were, all came to see me off. Everyone was crying. And when I arrived, of course, I saw my family. We were there for a week, and during that week, we visited every family. I didn't know these people personally—some of them I had met here in the U.S., and they gave me addresses. So, I visited every single family and recorded videos of all of them to bring back here. Back then, there was no Zoom, no FaceTime, and even calling was very difficult. So, my entire first visit was dedicated to recording these videos for their families. It was very important to me to bring them joy. We brought back videos of everyone's families—I met them all and saw their homes. That first time, I didn't see much else.

Later on, we couldn't travel often because Victor is very busy, and I am always busy too, so we don't get the chance. But the next time I went, I was so nervous. I was counting the moments until the plane landed, until I could step outside. And the next morning, as soon as the sun rose, I wanted to go to Plekhanov—I loved it so much. So, I told myself, "I'll go alone." I wanted to be by myself. I walked and walked, for a very long time. Everything was beautifully done—the streets, the houses, freshly painted, charming little cafes and bars. But what I was searching for… I can't even name it. Maybe I was looking for myself? I don't know what I was looking for, but it wasn't there. Do you understand?

I walked for a long time, but I didn't see it. The way people walked, the way they spoke—it was different. Before, when you'd walk down the street, you'd run into so many acquaintances, you'd stop, ni, someone would call out to you from a balcony, "How are you?" You'd shout back, "Aunt Keto, how are you?" (smiles). I was a part of something unified, part of the Tbilisi way of life, you know? And then I felt that I wasn't anymore. I don't know how to describe it…

There was one old café left, near Marjanishvili metro, on the other side. They used to sell pies and—what's the Georgian word for it? The pastry with cream inside? The one they call a "ponchik"? Yes, the cream-filled pastry. Back in the day, when I walked home from university, I would always stop there. I had such a strong craving for it. So, I went in and waited, waited, waited (smiles). Finally, it was my turn, but just then, the woman behind the counter got a phone call. She kept talking and talking, and wouldn't stop, you know? And I'm not the type to be pushy, but I had limited time that day. So, I very politely said, "Excuse me, if possible…" She got so mad, she scolded me so harshly. And you know what? I cried like a little child. I'll never forget that moment. It was like I had found someone familiar, and then… I don't think that café exists anymore. I never looked in that direction again. But I left feeling so hurt. That memory stayed with me for a long time—it still does, even after all these years.

But on the other hand, I have many wonderful friends in Georgia, truly kind and warm people. Of course, I would never judge Tbilisi or Georgia based on one person. It was just a characteristic moment, you know? Later, others told her off, saying, "How could you behave like that?" and they argued with her about it. But I have many great friends, though I don't see them as often as I'd like. We keep in touch, and when I visit, I always make sure to meet them.

As for my professional circles, I know many people, but also, I don't know a lot of people anymore. When I left 25 years ago—was it 25? Yes… back then, it was a completely different group of people in Georgia. The media, journalism—everyone was different. Now, everything has changed

100%. So, when people from Georgia come here and say, “Oh, this person is famous,” I don’t recognize them. Honestly, how would I know them?
But you know what? There’s one big difference between Georgia and here. Even though I have amazing neighbors in upstate New York, I still have to say—neighborhood culture in Georgia is something else. And friendship, too. Georgian friendship is a very strong institution. At least, it used to be. I don’t know about now, but that’s how it was. We grew up without psychologists. Back in the Soviet Union, there were no psychologists—apparently, we didn’t need them (smiles). Because friends were everything. Friendship served that role. It was incredibly strong. I think this is something essential for any culture—the institution of strong friendships. Because it solves so much.
My parents passed away when I was young—I grew up as an orphan. And I probably would have been very emotionally damaged if not for my friends. Their support was immense. We were always open with each other. I never had a friend with whom I had problems. Every single one of them was loyal. I am so grateful to God for that. Every single one was devoted, giving, and warm—absolutely everyone around me.

Interviewer: - Going back to what you mentioned earlier, you said that you want to lay the foundation on April 22 for this annual, unified, friendly festival—free from unhealthy competition—where the feeling is that everyone is contributing to the Georgian cause and that we should do it together. You also recalled that your organization was the first, and later, other centers were gradually established. In what periods was this activity more intense, when new centers were being created? How do these new waves of emigration align with specific time periods? And is there a unified culture of mutual support within the Georgian community? Is there a systematic approach in place? For example, if someone arrives, do we provide them with shelter or any other kind of assistance in an organized way? Do you have any information on this?

Respondent: - I want to understand precisely—are you referring to assistance among our centers when someone arrives?

Interviewer: - It could be between centers as well. For example, someone might reach out to you to share your experience because they are considering establishing a center themselves and are interested in your perspective. You also mentioned that a well-known figure might come and need help, and they could turn to you for assistance. Do we have a systematic approach to this, or are these isolated instances based on personal connections? Do newly arrived Georgian emigrants rely on acquaintances, or is there an established communication and support mechanism?

Respondent: - First of all, let me say that we were the first Georgian cultural center. We had a children's choreographic ensemble called "Roots," whose leaders worked with us for many years. Later, this center branched out and now operates independently and successfully. We also had the choreographer Irina Khutsurauli, who also separated from us and founded her own Irina Academy.

She came from our organization, and except for a few cases, we have been connected to almost every artist in this field—either they have been part of our company or they still are. It's true that many may no longer remember this, but thankfully, most people still do.

Now, what happened was that as emigration increased—more and more people kept coming—this led to the establishment of various centers in different locations. The growing number of people created a demand for more centers. One center alone could not handle such a large group. I always say that in our center, we have a specific principle. Other centers may accept as many students as they want, and I wish them success, but in our case, I cannot accept an unlimited number of children. Some argue with me about this, but I stand by my belief that if 60 children are in a single class, it is impossible for the teacher to give them all the attention they need. No one can convince me otherwise. I want a class size that ensures each child receives individual attention from the teacher. That's my vision. Because of this, one or two cultural centers are not enough—there are so many children now. So, it's great and necessary to have multiple centers, just like other cultures do, with everyone trying to do their best to preserve Georgian identity.

As for your second question (smiles)... A support system naturally formed over time. In the beginning, it was just us, just Viktor. If you look back—though I don't want to say anything inaccurate—based on what I know about the Georgian cultural world in America, as far as I'm aware, there isn't another American-born Georgian cultural center here in New York. There is one other person, Karl Linik, who is our friend and has a Georgian singing ensemble, but he doesn't have a cultural center where he invests his own funds. If there is someone like that, I wish them success.

Back then, we were the only ones, and whenever a Georgian needed help, they knew about Viktor. Some people knew him personally, while others had just heard of him, and they would come to us. Some people had nowhere to live and stayed with us. When I got married and moved in with Viktor, there were already seven Georgian men living with us because they had nowhere else to go. When I first arrived, there was only one Georgian man, but later, more came. They became like family to us, and we still keep in touch—they are wonderful people whom I love very much.

Viktor helped so many people. Even if they didn't live with us, if someone got into trouble—say, they were stopped by the police and didn't have a valid license—we would go with them to court and support them. If someone had an accident in the middle of the night, we would get up at 4 AM and go help. Viktor has helped so many people that no one could ever repay his kindness.

Older members of the Georgian emigrant community often acknowledge this, though newer arrivals may not be as aware. But now, there are many more people and various organizations that can provide assistance—Georgian lawyers, advisors, other organizations, and community groups. Many people have friends who help them as well.

In the past, a lot of artists would come and seek help, and we would support them. We never invited anyone to emigrate, but if an artist was already here and struggling, we helped them. Even now, for example, we recently took in a painter and gave them work as a theater artist because they needed help with their documents. We genuinely needed someone for the job, so it worked out.

One thing about Viktor (smiles)—he could never do something dishonest, even if no one was checking. I'm the same way—I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if something wasn't right. For example, I have a niece who was an actress and tried applying for an extraordinary talent visa. Viktor and I helped many people with this process before, completely free of charge. But when it came to my niece, we didn't even consider it because she simply wasn't an extraordinary talent. Just being an actor doesn't automatically make you extraordinary. That's just the kind of person Viktor is, and I deeply respect that about him.

Interviewer: - You mentioned the community earlier, and in fact, you brought it up before. You said that when Mr. Victor founded this center, he was provided with some, albeit limited, resources and sources. If you have any information, could you tell me who was involved back then?

Respondent: - You know, I don't remember exactly, but I can go and ask Victor if you'd like.

Interviewer: - You can message me later then, so you don't have to bother now. Do you have any connections with the community, with diaspora organizations?

Respondent: - Yes, of course, we have good relationships with everyone. There is a community here founded by Nika Chkheidze, and now we also have two churches in New York. We have a normal relationship with them as well. Our organizations are connected. For example, when we moved to a new building and had an opening event, we invited absolutely every organization, all the leaders, teachers, artists, writers, poets, and so on. I want this place to be a cultural hub. For instance, this Saturday, on the 25th, we have an exhibition of Leila Mchedlishvili's paintings. I want to maintain this kind of atmosphere. Previously, we held a poetry evening with Natia Khaduri. At this moment, I don't want this space to become a venue for birthday parties, you understand? I want to keep it in a different format. But I don't completely rule it out because if we struggle financially, we might have to do things outside our initial vision just to survive. But for now, thank God, we are managing to keep it as a place for poetry nights, art events, and film screenings—we will have a film screening next month as well. We want to serve the Georgian community, the Georgian diaspora.
As for the first community you mentioned, the first one was… (trying to remember) There was a woman who led it for a long time; she was one of the pioneers, and it was in Washington. It was quite interesting, actually. I have old video recordings of that community. They used to hold meetings, though it wasn't a cultural center like ours. It was more about official gatherings—political events, where they invited people, maybe performed two dances, sang a song. It was more of a political nature.

Interviewer: - At the beginning, you mentioned a concert you attended where, apart from the choreographer who taught the dance, almost everyone in the audience was American.

Respondent: - Yes, and also a friend of mine, who introduced me to Victor.

Interviewer: - In this case, where did the interest come from? For Americans, this wasn't part of their culture, so why were they interested in Georgian culture? Do you remember approximately how many dancers there were?

Respondent: - I'll tell you. First, Victor did great promotional work. Second, Americans are amazing people; they deeply respect different cultures. That's undeniable, isn't it? They have a great curiosity about new things, and at that time, Georgian culture was entirely new to them. It was something they had never heard of before, which naturally sparked their interest. The auditorium was packed—completely full. You couldn't even drop a needle in there. There were about 250 people, maybe more. I was sitting in the middle, and I kept crying. People around me were surprised, wondering why I was so emotional. But I felt a mix of pride, nostalgia, and many other emotions.
That's why I love this country so much. For me, America is represented by my husband and his friends. That's how I see America—through the people I know. They are very curious and open-minded. There were about… let me remember… probably around 16 dancers.

Interviewer: - What was their age range?

Respondent: - I can't say exactly, but three or four of them were soloists from the "City Ballet," so they were quite young. The others were in their 30s or 40s, somewhere within that range.

Interviewer: - At this stage, do you mostly have Georgian students, or are your groups mixed?

Respondent: - No, no… Only Georgians. Now we have both professional groups and a school. Our professional groups consist of trained dancers and singers. Our ensemble is called "Zekari," led by Paata Tsetskhladze, who is very well-known and highly professional. We also have a Georgian theater in New York.
Recently, I directed a play, and now a new one is being staged—"Iadonas Theatre." We are planning another play, and I am currently writing a script titled *Through the Keyhole* (ჭუჭრუტანაში). Do you want to hear the idea?

Interviewer: - Yes, please.

Respondent: - The play has two parallel storylines. One revolves around an old Italian courtyard (იტალიური ეზო) where many different people live, each with unique personalities. There is a large crack in one of the walls of the building. Some people notice it, some just talk about it, and some ignore it altogether.

The second storyline begins when someone looks through a keyhole and sees a neighbor lying on the ground. A huge commotion starts—people assume he has been killed. They even identify a supposed culprit, just based on past arguments. But in the end, the crack in the wall collapses, and everyone is left in their own "frames," expressing their beliefs. The idea is that half-truths and ignorance cannot define reality. Instead of obsessing over assumptions, people should focus on real, shared issues. The message is that it doesn't matter whether your chair is red or black—if the crack in the wall grows, the entire house will collapse.

I have different characters representing various traits we see today. Personally, I have never been affiliated with any political party, and I never will be. I prefer to be a free-thinking Georgian. I might agree with some things from one side and some from another, but I value my independence. Writing this play is challenging, but I am working on it.

We are also preparing for a performance in Germany. Our musical *The Lunatics* (*Sherekilebi*) was a huge success—we performed it five times in New York, and the tickets were always sold out. Many people who wanted to see it couldn't get in.

Interviewer: - Where do you usually hold these performances? Do you own a space, or do you rent venues?

Respondent: - All major events—like our big performance on the 22nd, theater productions, and plays—require professional venues. Theater performances need proper lighting, sound, and technical support, so we rent different halls. Sometimes in Manhattan, sometimes on Broadway, sometimes in Brooklyn—it depends.

We used to perform at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music), which has expensive venues. Renting a space can cost around $10,000–$12,000 per show. For example, our upcoming performance will cost around $12,000–$13,000. We finance this partly through ticket sales, and if we fall short, Mr. Victor helps us. We also receive grants, which are very important for securing these venues.

The challenge is that you can't price tickets too high. If a venue seats only 200 people, you can't charge $60 per ticket—it's just not feasible.

Interviewer: - Thank you very much! This was a very interesting interview.