Interview with Shorena Barbakadze, Head of the Cultural Center “Pesvebi”
Conducted by Maia Araviashvili
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Interviewer:
Hello and welcome. Today’s interviewee is Ms. Shorena, who leads the Georgian Cultural Center “Pesvebi.”
Could you please introduce yourself and share some biographical details—when and where you were born, a bit about your family, and tell us about your life in Georgia?

Respondent:
Hello, thank you so much for choosing to interview me. I don’t know, it might end up being a bit long a big story but I’ll try to keep it as short as possible. I came to America when I was 19 years old. That was 24 years ago, so this is the 25th year that we’ve been living in America. I was born in the city of Rustavi. Um... my mother was the head of a kindergarten, a psychologist in early childhood education, and my father was a veterinarian. But in our family, on both my mother’s and father’s sides, everyone sang and danced. My father and aunt used to participate in school Olympiads like there used to be during communist times they took part every year. They played the panduri, and my father played the guitar. They would sing in harmony. The Barbakadze family was known for this, even back then, in my neighborhood in Rustavi, where I was born.
Naturally, we me and my two sisters grew up surrounded by traditional folk songs from birth. As we grew older, we learned how to sing in harmony. There was no one happier than my father. He taught us traditional folk songs. He himself sang in an ensemble in the theater, in Rustavi, in the cultural center of the metallurgical factory. There was a folk ensemble there, and my father sang in it. They called it "Shvidkatsa" (The Seven Men). Whatever he learned there, he would teach us to sing in harmony. Whenever we traveled, whether to the village or visiting someone we always went singing from one song to the next.
As you know, during the 1990s there was no electricity that’s how we, the children of that generation, grew up. As soon as we finished our schoolwork during the day, we would all gather in the kitchen in the evening. There was a single gas stove, and we were fortunate to at least have gas. So, we’d spend our evenings in the kitchen singing song after song until it was time for bed. Even our neighbors knew—whenever the lights went out, the Barbakadzes would start their concert, with panduri, guitar, and folk songs. That’s how I grew up.

Dancing was my hobby, and it still is, of course. In those dark, cold times, our parents were real heroes managing to give us so much. They took us to dance classes and music schools. All three of us me and my two sisters graduated from music school (a seven-year program, შვიდწლედი), we all took dance lessons, played the panduri, guitar, everything our parents could offer us despite the chaotic circumstances. Truly, parents of that era are heroes.
Later, when I graduated from high school, I moved to Tbilisi for my studies. I was studying to become a translator… I was in my second year when I was also dancing in the ensemble "Varazi." In December 1998, the ensemble went on tour in America, and I was one of the 25 dancers selected to come.
Meeting my husband was probably also God's will he is a musician, an outstanding performer of traditional Georgian instruments, a composer, and plays 13 instruments. He too was born into a family of musicians. My father-in-law was a Meritorious Artist of Georgia, Aleksandre Goderdzishvili, who sang in the ensemble "Kolketi." I never imagined I would meet Vano especially since I grew up listening to the songs of "Kolketi."

Interviewer:
So, you met each other in America?

Respondent:
No, let me tell you. It happened during a rehearsal, when it was already decided that we were going to America. We were a group of dancers from the ensemble, and my future father-in-law, my future husband, and another third person came to the rehearsal. They had been selected to join us as part of the singers' group. You know how it is during the concerts, while the dancers are changing costumes, the musicians and singers perform on stage. So, these three joined us, and that's when we first saw each other. But I didn't even know his name or surname. It was just that kind of eye contact you notice someone watching you (laughs). That was the situation. In short, I saw my future husband only twice in Tbilisi before we flew to America.

Interviewer:
What year was this?

Respondent:
That was in '98, 1998. We met sometime in November, and by December we had already flown out. I even had some classes that were counted as credits, so I missed a rehearsal or two right before we left. And just like that, we, 25 of us found ourselves in America.

Interviewer:
At the age of 19...

Respondent:
At 19 years old, when I left for the tour, my parents never imagined I would stay abroad. Our family situation, even though we lived in poverty, wasn't such that they would send me away to work for the family. If my mother and father had even thought of that possibility, they would never have let their 19-year-old daughter leave. I left for a three-month tour, planning to return, but the situation changed. The promises we had been given did not materialize, and we went through extreme hardship. We lived on $10 a week, I don't even want to recall those times 25 people living in two rooms: girls in one room, boys in the other. We slept in shifts. It wasn't an environment where you could easily return after three months.
They had promised us $100 a day and constant concerts, so we had bought our own plane tickets. Many had to take out loans with high interest rates just to get here. Returning was no longer an option because my family had never been in debt and I couldn't burden them with one. So all 25 of us stayed. We danced at one restaurant for three months, but eventually, the management told us they could no longer pay our rent and suggested we either split up, or go back. We split up, and four of us girls went to Florida.

Interviewer:
So, the city you were initially in?

Respondent:
We were in New York from the beginning in the area where I still live today. Three other girls and I... One of them had a relative in Florida who worked as a hotel supervisor and needed staff, so we flew to Florida. At that time, my future husband, who was my boyfriend, was madly in love with me. He and my future father-in-law, who worked together sang in the restaurant (they didn't need dancers anymore). When I left, he couldn't bear it; he quit everything and said he was coming after Shorena (laughs). Within a week or two, he came to find me.
Of course, I was strongly against it at first. I refused because he had a child in Tbilisi although he was divorced and had left his family, I knew he had a wife and child. Despite his assurances that he was separated, living apart, and had no relationship anymore, I was very firm in my refusal. I was a girl raised in a traditional family, I needed my parents' approval. It became a struggle between me and Vano. Even my father-in-law, a grown man, was trying to convince me, telling me there would be no problems, that the child wouldn't be an issue, that Vano was divorced. He insisted I should agree.
Everyone in New York knew Vano was in love with Shorena (laughs). Even restaurant customers were cautious around me they wouldn't even greet me, worried that Vano would get upset (laughs). It was a huge story. Honestly, Vano tells it much better than I do.

When we arrived in Florida, we met Georgians Lia and Louisa, who were wonderful people and played a huge role in our lives. They would always say you could write a whole book about Vano's love for me how could I refuse someone who loved me that much? So basically, all of New York was involved in trying to settle things between me and Vano.

After about seven months, things finally fell into place. Vano came to visit, but he had to move to another state for work. After quitting the restaurant, he needed a job, and along with other dancers, he went to South Carolina, where there were hotel jobs available at the time. We stayed in Florida. South Carolina is about 10 hours from Florida, and he would drive back and forth, spending his entire paycheck on travel.

Eventually, we managed to inform my parents, and finally, Vano and I got married in Florida, starting our life together. Later, we moved from Florida to South Carolina, and from there, we returned to New York in 2000. We lived like typical immigrants, both Vano and I worked. We also continued dancing; we had a dance group.

We never lost touch with the 25 people we had started with even today, I could tell you where each one is. Some of us remain very close, while with others, the relationship is more distant. Many of us became godparents to each other's children. We survived hardship and emigration together.

Interviewer:

If you could recall your first experiences what challenges did you face? Aside from the fact that there were no jobs and you had to move from city to city, what difficulties did you encounter? What do you remember as the hardest moment? How did you manage it? Who was with you?

Respondent:

The first thing I remember is when we landed in Florida and I went through training on how to clean... Well, being Georgian (a girl)... For example, my mother had always taught us at home. We used to have weekly "uborka" (cleaning day) they called it that — and it was a regular thing (laughs). Since we were girls, we were expected to know everything. So, of course, it wasn't hard for us to learn how to clean hotel rooms the way they wanted.

The first time I went out alone, without a supervisor, I cried a lot. I remember vividly... They put me in a uniform, I was very skinny back then and they couldn't find my size, so the clothes were about ten sizes too big. On top of that, I wore an apron and carried a big cart, called a "kaleta," stacked with everything I needed. I was pushing it around, crying as I went, thinking about my mom...

My mother didn't know what kind of hardship we were going through. We didn't tell them. Back then, we could only call home once a week for five minutes — we didn't have money for calling cards or anything. It was important just to hear each other's voices once a week to know we were

alive and well. Of course, we didn't mention the struggles we faced daily. We reassured them that everything was fine.

I clearly remember standing there, having to knock on the first door, announce myself as housekeeping, "Housekeeper!" and it took me a few minutes just to bring myself to do it. I was crying so much, thinking, "Oh, Mother, if you could see me now… What am I doing here? I was supposed to study, I had other plans, and now I'm a hotel housekeeper." Not that I thought it was shameful, but still, it wasn't part of the plans I had for myself.

To this day, every time I stay at a hotel and we travel a lot for performances I try to leave the room tidy and also leave some money behind for the housekeeping staff. I remember how it felt when I earned $5.50 an hour and hoped that maybe, on top of my wage, someone would leave a little extra tip, so I could afford something small and nice for myself. Now I always try to do that for others, leave a neat room and a tip, so they can clean quickly and move on to the next room. This feeling has stayed with me for 24 years.

As for overcoming it, I think our marriage helped a lot. We, Georgians, stuck together and supported each other financially and emotionally. We helped each other find jobs. Later, we also danced in a group and performed at restaurants for birthdays, New Year's celebrations, holidays, and weddings, which helped financially too.

Financial hardship is one thing, but the psychological pressure was another. However, our togetherness made it easier to bear the emotional burden. It was very hard for those who had left behind children or spouses. I was alone at first, and later when I got married, psychologically, it wasn't as hard for me as it might have been for others.

When you're young, you handle hardships differently. If you're older, with a family to support, it's a different kind of weight.

So I think being together helped us manage psychologically.

Later, when I became pregnant, my father-in-law was with us and supported us financially until he returned to Georgia three years later.

When my first child, Giorgi, was born, he became the child of the entire Georgian immigrant community (smiles). Everyone would come to see him and pour their love into him the love and warmth they missed from their own families. Giorgi was born like that he grew up as the "child of emigration." Today he's 22 years old, and he grew up before the eyes of the whole old immigrant community. They all still love Giorgi dearly, and everyone who remembers his birth keeps a photo of him at home. Even today, when I meet someone, they say, "I have a photo of Giorgi at home!"

He grew up loved by the entire old Georgian immigrant community. It makes me very happy to see him grown into a strong Georgian man, successful and professional in everything he does.

Interviewer:
Let's also touch a little on expectations. When you left Georgia, as you mentioned, you had different expectations. How different was the reality you encountered here, and from today's perspective, would you make the same decision again, based on the experience you have gained?

Respondent:
In short, the expectations were, as I mentioned, that we would dance and earn a salary from concert performances. We were supposed to come for three months, and they promised us $100 per day. Just imagine, coming from a darkened Georgia, earning $100 a day, and saving a large amount in three months to return back — that was one moment that didn't come true. Afterward, everything depended on us, what steps we would take. I could have gone back, and my parents would have happily welcomed me, even if they might have accumulated some debt. However, there was another side to it: I truly hadn't planned to start a family, but it happened, and we did create a family. The expectation was that when our son Giorgi was born, we sent him to Georgia at five months old, intending to return as soon as possible. However, a child born here had the privilege of a passport, meaning he could return whenever we wanted.
I think we, as young people, made many mistakes back then. We didn't foresee that we would have to stay here for so long. We didn't hurry to legalize our status; we worked like every immigrant. Young people tend to spend differently, thinking money will always be there, saving nothing. Vano and I were unable to save anything and couldn't return. Every single day began with the desire to go back to Georgia, to buy something, to do something — but it never worked out.
I don't know whether to blame it on our youth or on misusing time, but you could say we misused time and didn't foresee how long we'd have to stay. And once you start a family with children, it becomes very, very hard to put something aside, especially when my husband had to change jobs often.
In Georgian culture, someone always has something to say, so Georgians wouldn't easily endure certain workplace environments. You leave one job, look for another, and so it goes. We never stayed at one job long. In America, even one day without work sets you back a week.
In short, we couldn't save, we couldn't go back. Giorgi was brought back again to live with us. Over the years, more and more Georgian children appeared who no longer spoke Georgian to each other. That was when my husband and I realized we had to do something.
We brought Giorgi back and thought: what do we do? We couldn't bear for our child to grow up speaking only English and forgetting Georgian. That would have been a huge blow (ძალიან დიდი დარტყმა) for us.
Before we sent Giorgi back in 2001, we, Georgians, used to gather in an Orthodox Church. Father Alexander was our priest then (and still is today), leading Georgian services wonderfully. Back then, Georgian girls, seeing that I was an active dancer with a dance group, performing at

various events, asked me to teach them Georgian dance. There was no internet then, no Zoom or Messenger; phone calls to Georgia were once a week at most. There was a huge longing for Georgian music and songs.
In 2001, in the church basement, I started teaching Georgian dance. Sundays became a celebration for everyone, coming together, dancing to Georgian music. My husband played the accordion, my friend played the drum (doli), and through that music, we eased our homesickness.
When I later saw that children were no longer speaking Georgian, and since we already had our own child, the situation clearly demanded that we create something Georgian for them. That's where the idea came from not because we had such expectations when we arrived in 1998. Life circumstances showed us the necessity.
Starting in 2003, we began gathering children. At first, I had only four students. I personally drove them to rehearsals and back so as not to burden their parents, who all had busy schedules. I made sure the kids didn't miss rehearsals.
Since 2001, we have been serving the Georgian cause. Over time we grew, and now if someone needs Georgian culture represented anywhere, we are We are not reluctant, we are ready to travel to other cities, states, or even Europe.
It's a blessing that our children also get to see other countries, cities, and states, and others see what Georgian culture is.
Even if we went to the Moon, if Georgians ever reached there, we would create our community and preserve our identity.
Indeed, the first generation of "Roots" (our organization) still speaks Georgian fluently, listens to Georgian music, and many have created Georgian families.
My son's generation, Giorgi's generation also speaks Georgian freely. We now have four children, and all of them speak Georgian fluently, love participating in Georgian activities, and proudly represent our culture 24/7.
We take pride in promoting Georgian culture wherever we can.
We never imagined at the beginning that we could build such a large school. Initially, many laughed at us, wondering why we were struggling and for whom , "who needs your Georgian culture here in America?" But we shattered that belief.
Even my relatives and parents constantly said, "Come back, come back — the kids won't grow up Georgian here, they'll be lost." Everyone cried over it.
But we proved that if you really want to, you can raise your children Georgian anywhere. My children read, write, and speak Georgian fluently, thanks especially to Teacher Rusudan. We sent two of our daughters to Georgia for two years to learn reading and writing, and now Mariam and Tekla know Georgian perfectly thanks to her.
We have a younger daughter, Sophie, six years old, who also studies with Teacher Rusudan. Today, Mariam is 18 and works as a translator at a lawyer's office — her English and Georgian are both excellent, as are many other children's.

Recently, a Turkish company approached us — they organize shows and were so impressed with our children that they want them to continue participating in their events. Not only in Georgian dances but also teaching others different dances.
Two weeks of rehearsals just finished, and they will come again in April and October. Before they left, the manager (not a choreographer) said, “I don't know how you do it, but your kids even speak Georgian to each other, ages 14–20. Among our Turkish community, kids hardly speak Turkish anymore.”
What could be more rewarding than that? No money, no wealth could replace that pride. This Georgian work (ქართული საქმე) my husband and I have dedicated our whole lives to it. The greatest appreciation is that people recognize it, that these kids stayed Georgian. We saved generations, promoted Georgian culture, and made a name for it everywhere we could. Just two weeks ago, we had a performance in Atlanta, Georgia. Even today, the festival organizers are still talking about our children, the dances, the costumes everything. What kind of performance you staged they are sayng.

Interviewer:
Let’s dig deeper into that situation the Turkish businessman’s partner’s question. If we think functionally, what exactly are you doing that others might not be doing to preserve Georgian identity? One part is dance, another is learning the Georgian language, but maybe you have a specific approach to teaching or communicating, an additional mechanis, that keeps Georgianness alive in everyday practice. Let’s explore that more closely.

Respondent:
Generally, my husband and I demanded that at home, when the children spoke to each other, they spoke in Georgian. We also asked their friends to do the same. You couldn’t set foot in our home without speaking Georgian.
When we sent Giorgi to Georgia for two years, he completed third and fourth grade there, people there would ask him to teach them English, to speak English, and he would say, “No way, if my dad finds out, he’ll scold me” (smiles). Even there, he continued speaking Georgian and wasn’t afraid of forgetting English - that's one thing.
Then there were the little kids. They used to call Vano (my husband) “Bua,”(scary man) and when they saw him coming, they would quickly switch to Georgian, even if they had been speaking English just moments before. They’d say, "Uncle Bua is coming, speak Georgian!" (smiles). Those children — the ones who are now 18 years old and who were practically born into our hands, growing up alongside our kids — have stayed with us from day one, and even as little ones, they had this rule: when Vano was around, they spoke Georgian.
When they enter the dance hall today, they know — inside the hall, they must speak Georgian.

Of course, sometimes little moments slip by they start speaking English but as soon as I hear it, I immediately intervene. I remind them: “This is a Georgian school. Where do you go? What’s the name of your school? ‘Roots.’”
Then we explain what “Roots” means. It's even written on our T-shirts in both Georgian and English. They must know what school they attend and why it’s called “Roots” — that it’s about preserving their heritage.
Because here in New York, especially, every school has a special day where children have to present their national culture where they are from through costumes, food, whatever their families can prepare.
Every moment in New York you hear, “Where are you from?” they must know how to answer.
Of course, there are families who honestly don't care whether their kids speak Georgian or English. Beyond that, there’s also the natural challenge: children who grow up hearing two or three languages can have delayed speech, and many specialists recommend focusing on English only, at least until age three or four, to help the child develop language skills more easily.
I’m not talking about those cases where it’s medically necessary to focus on one language. I'm talking about the families who simply don’t care what language their children speak.

Interviewer:
Roughly speaking, how many families genuinely don't care whether their kids speak Georgian, and how many are actively trying to maintain Georgian language, lifestyle, identity?

Respondent:
Whoever comes to us to "Roots" — almost certainly values preserving Georgian identity. Otherwise, they wouldn’t end up here.
A parent wouldn’t bring their child to a Georgian environment, to a Georgian school, or even consider it worthwhile to pay even a small fee for it, unless they cared.
How could I sustain such a big rehearsal hall or everything else without the parents' support? If a parent didn’t care, they wouldn’t bother — they wouldn’t pay the fee, they wouldn’t come, they wouldn’t sit and wait during rehearsals, they wouldn’t accompany us to performances. Families like that, who are indifferent, tend to stay away from Georgian spaces and find themselves involved elsewhere.

Interviewer:
When we talk about "Georgianness" itself, for you, as the head of such a large cultural center — what do we mean by preserving Georgian identity? What does preserving Georgian identity mean to you personally?

Respondent:

First and foremost, it's about remembering where you come from, that's exactly why our cultural center is called "Roots."
They must always remember who they are, where they come from, and what culture and country they represent.
We always emphasize this point.
Maybe there's not always time during rehearsals, but when the children grow up a little, when we take them on tours or trips, we hold lecture-like talks for them.
We explain what it means to be Georgian, what kind of history we have survived, how such a small country made it through such difficult times without disappearing.
Even here in America, although they are Georgian-Americans, they must preserve their Georgianness, because we truly have something to be proud of, something worth showing the world.
It's important to make it clear to everyone that we are not Russians we are Georgians, the descendants of a miraculous small nation.
These kids always need this connection.
In schools, they work on projects, they organize celebrations, concerts and they complete these projects with great pride, showing that their roots are in Georgia and that they are Georgians.
For me personally, I don't even know how to fully express it, I am a very big patriot of my country, and so is my husband.
Probably if we didn't have this patriotism, we couldn't have withstood everything we went through.
We faced and still face a lot of pressure.
Thanks to God's help, our own hard work, and the support of parents, we have managed to survive.
It is truly a miracle that "Roots" has lasted for 22 years.
There were many moments when we felt like giving up, when we said, "That's it, we can't do this anymore," but with God's blessing, we are still here.
Even today, parents call me saying, "Shorena, please let the kids come back home, they have school tomorrow, they need to go home."
The children have each other; they are happy to be together.
The first generation of our students still helps each other to this day — whether it's finding a job, becoming godparents to each other's children, or simply maintaining a close circle.
Generations are following one another in this way.
Many parents met through "Roots" and are now relatives through marriage.
We do all this so that we don't get lost, so that we don't get mixed into other cultures, but rather preserve centers like this that maintain Georgian culture abroad.
We Georgians are very nostalgic and patriotic — maybe even more so than we initially thought.

But honestly, seeing other nationalities Muslims, Arabs, Pakistanis they all try to preserve their culture, their language, their religion.
They build their own churches and mosques and why shouldn't we, Georgians, do the same? We have nothing to lose; on the contrary, we should make the world know who we are, where we come from, what kind of heritage we carry.
We have exceptionally talented children, and I know they will achieve great things. The "code" of being Georgian that we plant in them during childhood will later benefit Georgia greatly.
I truly believe that these talented children will take important positions tomorrow and the day after, and they must remember the roots we instilled in them so that even if they don't directly help Georgia, they will at least help the Georgian community abroad.
And if they do return and contribute to Georgia itself, then one of our biggest dreams will come true and that's also one of our main goals.

Interviewer:
Now, speaking of maintaining contact and communication with Georgia Mrs. Rusudan proudly mentioned during her interview that during the 2015 flood in Tbilisi, you organized charity concerts and helped the victims.
She also said that you frequently organize concerts in Georgia itself and continue the work you do here, over there too.
Could you tell us a bit about that?
Beyond your professional activities and taking children to Georgia, how would you describe your communication with Georgia?
How do you maintain contact?
How does your communication with Georgia help your work and your daily life here? What forms does that communication take?

Respondent:
I wouldn't say that we are very engaged in everyday life communications with Georgia, in general, we don't like to bother people. Whatever we do, we carry a lot on our own shoulders, a lot of our time, work hours, finances. I personally don't like asking for help just because of who I am or what I'm doing. If we have traveled, it's often been with our own resources. For example, in 2015, when I traveled to Georgia, a few children came with us for the first time. They reunited with their relatives, and the following year their parents were saying, laughing, "Shorena and Vano, what are you doing to us? We can't afford yearly trips to Georgia, but now the kids are begging to go every year!"

Our communication with Georgia mainly starts with the families. The children absolutely love being there. When they have not seen Georgia for a few years, parents or sometimes I manage to take them. Their reaction is always the same: "Mom, why are we living in America cramped into one or two rooms, when here we have such big houses and yards?" They don't want to come back, they want to stay there, especially at a young age when they can run free and roam everywhere. In the U.S., their movement is very restricted, they have to stick close to their parents or an adult until a certain age. Even my own four children grew up cramped into a small space, so they always notice and question why we're not living in Georgia with all that space.

As for 2015, when we traveled, our close friend Irina Khuchiaashvili helped us organize a concert at the Rustaveli and Griboedov Theater. The Ministry of Culture, particularly Ms. Nina, also supported us by waiving the rental fee. All proceeds from the concert went to families affected by the devastating June 13 flood in Tbilisi, specifically to a priest's family who lost their daughter, Ivleta.

We frequently participate in charity concerts and explain to the children what charity means and why it's important, so that when they grow up, achieve success, and have the financial means, they'll know to give back, not just money but also their time and effort. We teach them that no matter where life takes them, they must remain charitable. When we came to Tbilisi, we showed the children exactly how the concert proceeds were helping real families.

Originally, we had other plans, but when tragedy struck, the situation changed, and everyone agreed the proceeds should go to charity.

Now, again, we're planning another concert this summer, on July 9, 2023, at the Philharmonic State Concert Hall in Tbilisi. This will be "Fesvebi's" (Roots') solo concert. We want the children to perform in front of a Georgian audience, it's very important. Performing for Georgians is completely different than performing for foreigners, the children prepare differently, feel differently, and take it very seriously. We want the Georgian audience to see what we have built far away from home, and we want our children to see the warm reception and encouragement from Georgians, to show them that preserving Georgian culture and identity matters.

We hope this concert will also plant the idea in their hearts that one day they should return and serve Georgia. This is our goal: to strengthen their Georgian identity and their bond with Georgia.

Regarding official connections, we reach out to the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Patriarchate, television channels, whoever we can, to make sure people know about the concert. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs always allocates grants for diaspora ensembles and schools. This year, for instance, we received two grants. One grant of 10,000 GEL was used entirely for the children's costumes. Today, our older kids wear Adjarian costumes and black chokhas (traditional Georgian coats) made from that grant. The other grant supported our solo concert.

Of course, these grants don't cover everything, but even a little support is a huge help. Still, I often feel conflicted, should I even apply for grants? I sometimes feel that by accepting grants,

I’m taking resources away from children in Georgia. I know that's not entirely rational, but that's how I feel. Many times I hesitated to apply, but friends kept encouraging me, “Shorena, apply! It will help sew costumes; it will help the parents too.” Many parents have two or three children like I do, and buying multiple sets of costumes is a burden. The grants help lighten that burden. Even for me personally, it's a relief.
Nonetheless, deep down, it still aches, I always feel that maybe I'm depriving Georgian children in Georgia of something.
But overall, I’m incredibly grateful to our state for however much they can help Georgian schools abroad. Their support is invaluable.

Interviewer:
When we look at the local Georgian community here, are there mechanisms of mutual assistance? You mentioned earlier that the 25 members of your group used to support each other. If we look at the current situation, what are the experiences now? How do Georgians help each other? How do they support newcomers in overcoming the challenges of the initial period? Are there any systemic mechanisms, or is it still more of an individual effort where everyone seeks their own network to overcome the first challenges?

Respondent:
I'll tell you a bit about the reality now. There is this situation between the earlier immigrants and the new arrivals (laughs). I'm personally quite closed off now. From September to July, we basically don't have a life outside of work. I try not to get too involved, but if someone needs my help, I’m here, and I help as much as I can. However, where there are Georgians, there is always some negativity, but of course, a lot of positivity too. I will say this: when others from outside our community look at us, they are always shocked, they wonder how Georgians manage to support each other so strongly and how we've raised the level of culture so high, how we’ve raised children so connected to their heritage. Many non-Georgians have told us they are surprised: "How do you manage all this? Who helps you? How are you able to maintain such high standards?" They are impressed by the quality, particularly when comparing Georgian schools abroad to others.
As for relations among Georgians themselves: among the older and newer immigrants, there’s always some tension. The older ones often say, "You new arrivals don't want to go through what we went through. You refuse to accept low-paying jobs. You want everything quickly, things we worked years for." And the new arrivals respond, "Why should we go through the same hardships? Why do the older immigrants insist that we struggle just like they did?" (smiles). So this kind of tug-of-war always exists between the older and newer immigrants.

But despite that, I will say that the new arrivals receive a lot of help from the earlier immigrants, from those who have established themselves and are stable enough to offer even a little help. I know many people around me who offer tremendous support. There are many Georgian Facebook groups, countless ones, that try very hard to help new immigrants, even those who haven't arrived yet. They are provided with information and support without even needing to ask.

There are many groups, I don't like listing names because I'm afraid of leaving someone out, but groups like "Millennium," "Us in America," "blessed deed (მადლიანი საქმე)","Super Moms," led by Ms. Mzia Tzulukidze, and many others. I always express my gratitude to them because what they do requires nerves of steel, a lot of time, and deserves real appreciation: finding housing, finding jobs, finding doctors, they are always ready to respond and assist.

I saw this especially during COVID. For example, under the leadership of Mr. Nika Chkheidze, a crisis center was formed with many Georgians involved, including Ms. Ina. Doctors and volunteers mobilized, and many were engaged. I personally transferred money a few times because I couldn't physically help, but others could, some helped with physical assistance, some with financial aid. Tremendous support was provided during that time, food deliveries, transportation, finding necessary supplies, not only in America but money was also being sent from here to Italy and other countries where Georgians abroad were struggling.

So I can't say that Georgians don't help each other. Maybe there are one or two, maybe ten, dissatisfied individuals who feel that an older immigrant didn't help them, but overall, I can say that 90–99% of the time, Georgian immigrants do receive assistance.

Interviewer:

If we compare the older generation of immigrants to the newer one, how similar are the challenges they face? For example, issues like legal or illegal status, language proficiency, finding a job, among these three components: language barriers, financial support, employment, and obtaining legal status, how similar or different are they for the newer wave compared to the older immigrants?

Respondent:

I believe that what the older generation of immigrants went through, the new generation simply cannot experience, physically cannot, because today's new immigrants have access to so much information. They just won't go through what we went through. Of course, we had language barriers, of course we were unemployed, of course many of us were undocumented, and I don't even know how we managed back then. We would search for jobs through word of mouth and over the phone. There were certain agents you could call to find work, and some of those agents are still around even today (smiles).

But back then, we were truly in an informational vacuum. Imagine arriving in 1998, there was no internet, no mobile phones, no communication tools. The new arrivals can't experience that, even if they tried, because today you don’t even have to ask questions, the answers are already available. Thanks to phones, internet, and recorded resources, they have everything at their fingertips.

Interviewer:
You mentioned moving to Philadelphia and spoke about two women who helped, if I remember correctly, had they arrived before you?

Respondent:
Yes, they had arrived before us. This was in Florida. They were already there. One of our dancers knew one of the women because she was her neighbor, so she had her phone number and knew that Lia was there. So our dancer came prepared, knowing she could call her if needed (smiles). And when the time came, after we needed certain documents, we called her. She said, "Come on, girls, I have jobs for you." By then, she was already a supervisor.

Interviewer:
Do you remember approximately how long before you she had arrived?

Respondent:
Maybe about 1 to 2 years earlier, not more. During that period, immigration really surged, and Georgia pretty much emptied out (laughs). So at most, she would have been there 1 to 2 years before us.

Interviewer:
For the period we're talking about, most of the people we've interviewed so far arrived in 1997-1998, do you remember your travel route? Through which cities did you fly?

Respondent:
For us, it wasn’t difficult to get visas. We didn't have to stand in long lines for days and nights. We went as a dance group, all dressed nicely, and got our visas very quickly.
As for the flight, if I remember correctly, it was Tbilisi to Moscow, we had to stay about 24 hours in Moscow, maybe overnight and then from Moscow, we flew directly to New York.
This is actually a funny memory for me and Vano: I heard his voice for the first time during that layover in Moscow. In Tbilisi, we hadn't really spoken before. I just overheard that he was married, and for me, that was enough, I decided right then and there to keep my distance (laughs).

In Moscow, there wasn’t much else to do, and someone told me, "He plays the panduri!" and that's how Vano approached me. We spent that night singing songs together in the airport, and then we flew to New York.
Once in New York, the husband of our group leader, who had arrived earlier, was already there. He had rented an apartment for us, took us there, and then our real hardships began. I think even our leaders didn’t fully expect how things would turn out, it wasn't well organized. Eventually, we all had to stay together, and honestly, deep down, I always had the idea that I might stay here, but I didn’t tell my parents because if I had, they would never have let me leave (laughs).

Interviewer:
Do you plan to return to Georgia someday, and if so, why do you intend to return?

Respondent:
Yes, it’s our dream. As I mentioned earlier, we made a mistake from the beginning by always thinking we would eventually return, so we didn’t take care of our legal paperwork properly. My husband returned to Georgia for the first time after 23 years, he hadn't been back for 23 years and even we wonder how we managed, how we endured, and how such a patriotic person could bear it.
What helped him endure was the work we were doing, he was constantly involved in Georgian causes, always surrounded by Georgian children, Georgian culture, Georgian activities and that made it feel like he was still in Georgia even though we were physically in America. Honestly, when you are among our community here, you feel like you are still in Georgia; you don’t really feel you are in America.
Regarding returning, we are always "returning," even today, we are still "returning." We've been in this process for 25 years now.
But, in reality, we haven't even been able to move from New York to another city, let alone back to Georgia.
It’s as if something keeps calling us back, the work we are devoted to, the Georgian cause (საქმე) keeps pulling us back to New York, tying us to these "roots."
And I can say honestly: I love these roots no less than my own children, because we have invested so much time and energy into them, sometimes even more than into our own family. There were many times when we said, "Let’s move somewhere else or leave," but then we’d always ask ourselves, "But what about the roots? What about the roots?" (smiles)
We went through that process many times, we just couldn't leave the community and the environment we built here.
And this played a huge role in why we didn’t return earlier, why we missed the right time to go

back.
I always regret that, that we wasted so much time and didn't take care of financial matters properly.
The only property Vano and I own in Georgia is a single apartment we managed to buy in 2004. I remember it well and my mother-in-law helped make that happen.
Other than that, we've always thought, "Yes, we'll go back," but you need a solid foundation to return, otherwise, you risk running back here again if things don't work out.
We still haven't created that solid base because all our finances and time have been consumed by the "roots."
We didn't have enough resources left to build something back home that would allow us to return permanently.
But to this day, we are always returning.
Now, we're thinking , since our children are grown, if they are willing to move back too, and they really do love Georgia (my daughters especially said they wanted to study there and continue their lives there), we're planning to move as well.
Once our children are settled and no longer need mom and dad's daily support, Vano and I are still planning to go.
Vano dreams of living in his hometown, he is from Sno, near Kazbegi and we want to live there.
From there, we hope to help our children as much as we can and also give back to Georgia.
We want to share our life experience, we have enough to give real lectures on it especially Vano.
We want to help the youth in Georgia so they know what to expect if they choose to go abroad, how to start, what to avoid, and so they don't repeat the mistakes we made.
By the way, I always say that emigration is like military service, just as military service is important for young men, I believe every young person should experience at least two years abroad.
It really changes your perspective: you appreciate your time differently, you value your homeland more, and you re-evaluate everything.
It would be great if there were programs where young people could live abroad for two years, endure the hardships without mommy and daddy, learn how to survive on their own, and then come back.
It would help them a lot in life.
Experiencing emigration isn't a bad thing, even just how time is structured abroad is different, and you learn to manage your time better, to move quickly toward your goals.
I truly believe that two years abroad would be beneficial for young people, but I'm afraid that once they leave, they might not come back (laughs).
Everyone should return, that's important.

Interviewer:
Thank you very much for the interview.