LE: This is Leora Eisenberg interviewing Sizanna Janashvili. The date is March 9, 2023, and this interview is taking place in person in Rego Park, New York. This interview will be recorded as an audio file and it will be, upon Sizanna's agreement, accessible publicly. Sizanna, I was hoping that we could start with some biographical information. When were you born? Where were you born?

SJ: I was born in Tbilisi on September 9, 1954. Growing up was wonderful because my mother had a beautiful country home. We spent the winter in the city, and we spent all summer in nature. We had a farm and chickens and cows. Lots of fruits and vegetables – my grandma grew all of them. It was fun for us kids to spend the whole summer in such an environment. I went to school in the city.

After 8th grade, I went to a special art school, the Jacob Nikoladze Art School. He was actually a pupil of Rodin. It's a very good school, and I graduated in 4 years.

And then after that, we emigrated. I was actually accepted into [the Arts] Academy in Tbilisi. I was accepted but I did not go because we had to leave.

LE: Tell me, who was in your family?

SJ: My father, Mordekhai Janashvili, was very well known already at a young age. My mother was a nurse. Ekaterina Asitashvili.

Actually, they met… My father had a very difficult time while he was going through the Academy. Under the Soviet regime, there were lots of problems. He had to take time off, he needed a letter. He went to a clinic to get this letter, and this is how my mother and father met. They fell in love. And so that's how they got together. He was in the third year of the Academy when they married. I was born before he finished the Academy.

In 1957, my brother was born, David. He's a musician. Very good singer. His pseudonym is David Monte Cristo. He chose this name. He says that he is Monte Cristo because he likes giving. He published his first CD, and he was just giving everybody his love.

LE: Your family is Jewish. Were you involved in Jewish things in Georgia?

SJ: Actually, no. I was not involved. My father was not religious either. His mother was very religious because she was Lithuanian Jewish. She came to Georgia and married a Georgian Jewish guy, Yitzchak Janashvili. She was the daughter of a Lithuanian rabbi. Her name was Sonia Marmer.

LE: Interesting. So no one went to synagogue?

SJ: I would attend every Passover with my grandmother. We always attended, but my father was not religious. We lived in a communist country, and he really believed in Marx. He was working on the theme of Marx. When he graduated from the Academy, his thesis was "Marx and Engels in London Discussing Poverty and hHmelessness." He really, really believed in Marx, and he thought that the Soviet Union really would accomplish this ideology and would

eventually build communism. But this was utopia. It did not happen. Actually, it was centralized power, and he was under pressure not to have freedom in his art, to make paintings which represented Soviet ideology. And who would like that? Artists would not like this. But somehow, he tried. He knew that Marx was Jewish. That's why he chose this.

LE: Ah, I see. That's so interesting.

SJ: He had many pictures. Then, he had a personal exhibition about Marx. He donated work to a Moscow museum, the Marx and Engels Museum. It was a big mural. They printed his painting in a calendar. So from a young age, he became very famous, very recognized.

LE: So when you grew up in Tbilisi, art was a part of your life. It was part of your home environment.

SJ: Yes. What did I see besides art? We did not have much. We had a small apartment – actually it was a studio. My father was painting, we slept there. It was our living room. It was everything. Imagine – two children. They did not even give him a one-bedroom apartment. He already had two children, and they only gave him a studio.

Before we left, the KGB came to him and said, “don’t leave.”

LE: What year was this?

SJ: 1973. We left in ‘74.

LE: Tell me more about this. What did they say?

SJ: They came and said, “don't leave us. Don't betray our way of life to capitalism, because you have everything here for free. We're going to give you a studio.” And they actually gave him a very good loft as a kind of emergency. And in front of our building, they were building houses. They told him, “you are going to have a three-bedroom apartment, you’re going to have everything for free. Don't go. Don't take your children, your wife to a capitalist society.”

My mother was not Jewish. She converted to Judaism because of my father. For my mother, it was very difficult to leave everybody in the Soviet Union: her mother, her sisters, her brother, all her relatives. She had a very good job. She was the head of nursing in a maternity hospital. Everybody felt so bad for my mother. She had everything. You know, we had everything already. But my father's mother and brother had already immigrated to Israel.

LE: Oh, okay. So let's talk about that. How old were you when your family decided to emigrate?

SJ: I was 17 when we decided, but 19 years old when we emigrated. The process took two years.

LE: And what was this process? What did you have to do?

SJ: The process was very difficult, very difficult, because we could not actually afford it. We had to pay for plane tickets, to pack everything. My father had three hundred works already. They said, “this is the Soviet Union's property. It does not belong to you.”

LE: So your father's artwork stayed in Georgia.

SJ: It did not stay there. Some friends told him, “you know what? We're going to take care of this problem. We're going to take these paintings out for you. And you will work for us in Israel, when you go there.” But they paid a lot of money for this. I don't know how they did it.

LE: Who paid money to whom?

SJ: Probably customs agents. My father could not afford to buy his own paintings. He could not afford it, but it happened. They actually took it. But when he arrived in Israel, they expected my father to pay back this money. My father was penniless.

LE: I want to understand. The customs agents sent over the artworks. They said they would help, but then they expected your father to pay even though they said they would help him?

SJ: They helped him, but for business. My father would pay them back. They paid for this because my father could not afford to pay. You had to buy your own things. They had money. But then we arrived in Israel. They were trying to make money… But my father said, “how can I pay you this? I don't have a job. I don't have anything.” He just arrived. He was in *ulpan* [Hebrew language classes].

I don't know everything exactly, but he did not like the relationship with what they demanded. He heard that they wanted to leave Israel. My father would not leave Israel. He was a big patriot. He was a Zionist. He said no, “if you're planning to leave, I'm not going to leave Israel.”

LE: Did he say this to you? Or to these people?

SJ: To these people. Then this is what happened to me. My in-laws decided to leave Israel. I already gave birth to my son in Israel, so I had to leave my father because I did not want my son to lose *his* father, my husband, who had left Israel with his parents. He was already somewhere in emigration. Belgium, Italy. You could not come to the United States right away. You had to go through a process. So I left my father to meet them in Italy. From Italy, we arrived in New York.

LE: What was the route you took?

SJ: The route was through Brest, in the Soviet Union. It's like a special route from Brest to Belgium. And it was by train.

LE: So you took a train from Tbilisi to Brest?

SJ: Tbilisi to Brest, then from Brest to Belgium. And then from Belgium, they distributed us. They asked, “where do you want to go?” It was all of us: my family, my husband's family. We all chose Israel. From Belgium, we chose Israel. In Israel, what happened? My in-laws decided to leave Israel. Why? They were young. They had a son. My brother-in-law was 17 years old. My husband was 19 like me. They had already received draft notices. My mother-in-law got very scared because we witnessed terrorist attacks, the Ma’alot terrorist attack.

We lived in *ulpan*, in Sfat. They took school children. These are children that we saw every morning, all the time. We were talking to them, joking, laughing, telling stories. All of the sudden, the next day, everybody was gone.

LE: So this pushed your family members to leave Israel.

SJ: My in-laws.

LE: Let's back up a little bit. Who came with you to Israel?

SJ: Everybody. My father, my mother, my brother, and my in-laws – they are Elisabeth and Rafael with Roman and Roland. Roland is my husband, and Roman is my brother-in-law. Eight of us. And I was already pregnant.

LE: What factors led you first to move to Israel from Georgia?

SJ: Not that we had a bad life. No. My father was a Zionist. It was January 24th, 1974.

LE: So right after the Yom Kippur War.

SJ: It was right after the Yom Kippur because we were in Tbilisi when the Yom Kippur War happened.

LE: Was that a factor?

SJ: Yes, of course. It was very painful for our community, we felt solidarity with Israel.

LE: And who made the decision to leave?

SJ: My father. We were children. How can you make a decision? I'm not making the right decision. My brother was not making it. It was my father's decision.

LE: Did you already have family in Israel when you left?

SJ: Yes, my father’s relatives.

LE: And you lived in Sfat the whole time? Or did you live in other places?

SJ: We lived in Sfat maybe for seven months. Then, Ted Kollek, the mayor of Jerusalem,

called my father and offered an apartment in Jerusalem.

LE: Your father knew Teddy Kollek?

SJ: Yes, he bought a painting from him right away. Then, they hung his painting in the Knesset. It's still there.

LE: You said that you lived in Israel not for very long, right?

SJ: It was not even not a year. It was seven months in Tsfat. After that, I had to leave. My son was four months old when I had to leave Israel.

LE: You said earlier that the reason that you left Israel was because your parents-in-law decided to leave because of the terrorist attacks, and your husband wanted to follow them.

SJ: It was very painful for me to leave my father. Very painful. He did not want me to leave, but he could not say no either, because I needed support. My child was born. He did not have any means to support me. He was borrowing money, waiting for an exhibition. He had started to paint already, in order to have an exhibition and make some money because he did not have any. So how could he support me?

LE: So your parents-in-law were going to support you.

SJ: My mother-in-law called me and said, "when you come here, we're going to take care of you." And my husband started crying. "Please bring my son." Because I was saying no. I wanted to stay with my father. But actually, I was helpless.

LE: So your parents-in-law had already left?

SJ: They went first. They went to Belgium. And after Belgium, they got a *laissez-passer*, special passports. Traveling passports. And from Belgium, they went to Nayana, an organization in Italy. It was a Jewish organization that supported us. Nayana gave us money for food, for a place to stay for some time, for rent. And they arranged our flight to the United States. They chose – probably we did not choose [where to go]. They sent us to New York.

LE: Yes, and what year did your parents-in-law leave Israel?

SJ: Same year, it's all '74. Right away.

LE: Soon after you come, almost immediately, your parents in-law leave.

SJ: Yes.

LE: And when did they come to Israel?

SJ: Same time. We all arrived at the same time.

LE: When did you leave Israel?

SJ: I left four months after my son. He was born on October 2nd, 1974.

LE: So January 1975?

SJ: Something like this.

LE: And did you take the same route as your parents-in-law?

SJ: We went right away to Italy. I didn't go to Belgium. Right away to Nayana.

LE: And then from Italy to New York?

SJ: Yes.

LE: And why did your parents-in-law choose New York?

SJ: My mother-in-law lost her father when she was young. He was a businessman. And in the Soviet Union, you could not do any business. He was arrested doing this, and they sent him to Siberia. So his dream was one day to live in America. My husband's grandpa – my mother-in-law's father – his dream was to live in America. He was a wealthy man. They arrested him. And who got his treasures? Nobody knows, because he was hiding them at home. You could not show what you are doing. He was traveling a lot and making money. He was a good businessman. But he was not allowed to do business. That's why they arrested him for a while. He was in a prison there. After prison, they sent him to Siberia, and he disappeared. He disappeared. Nobody knew whether he died or they killed him. Nobody knew. So my mother-in law, Elizabeth – she's recently passed…

LE: Oh, my condolences.

SJ: Her dream was that maybe he somehow escaped Siberia and went to America. That's why she thought to come here. She went through many channels to find out. We could not find him. They killed him there. He was such a handsome man. Very, very handsome. A good family man, and he dreamed of having a good life, but the Soviet Union would not allow you to have private enterprise and to have any wealth. No way.

So that's why we ended up here. I never would have imagined this. We went to Israel. But New York? America? Where did this come from? But that's what happened. My father did not leave. But my mother left because of us. She could not stand being without us.

LE: So your father stayed alone in Israel?

SJ: Not alone. He got married right away. And we left him. My mother could not stay without us. She left everybody, her country, her work, relatives, friends, everything. All of the sudden, her children were gone too. She could not stand it. She left. "I have to be with my children." My

father said, “okay, but if you go I have to have my own life because I will not leave Israel.”

LE: Was it always his dream to come to Israel?

SJ: Yes, I think so. I think it was hidden in him because he could not talk about it. But yes. It was his dream to be on his ancestors’ land.

LE: Back to New York. Did you originally come to Rego Park?

SJ: You know what happened? Right away, Nayana put us in a hotel for a couple of months. On 34th Street, the Collingwood Hotel. They put us in a hotel and paid for it. After two months, they told us to look for an apartment. “In the beginning, for a few months, we are going to help you. Then, you have to figure out your life.” I was already was pregnant for the second time, with my daughter. I got pregnant in Italy.

So for two months, they supported us, and then they told us to start looking for apartments in Manhattan. Then, they said, “wait a moment! Don’t look for apartments in New York!” Because we did not know the prices. We did not know anything. We were new in this country. We did not speak English. So they said, “you know what? Go to the subway. Come out. There is a nice place, Rego Park. Maybe you'll find an apartment there.” So my parents, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law…. I was pregnant. I did not start looking. They managed this. They came to Rego Park. They walked by, and the super was standing outside. They walked by and asked, “Do you have an apartment?” He said, “yeah.” Just like this. Not like now. We got an apartment right away. This is the apartment.

LE: So you've been in this apartment since you moved here in 1975?

SJ: Yes.

LE: Wow.

SJ: Many times, I thought about leaving. Somehow, we stayed here. But I don't regret it. It’s a very nice neighborhood. I wish I had more space, but I'm an artist.

LE: You came here with your parents-in-law. Did they live with you or separately?

SJ: No. They had their own apartment, and we had hours. Then, my mother and brother also got an apartment in the same neighborhood, close by. So in a couple of months, after they [Nayana] had paid for several months’ rent, they said, “that’s it. You are off. Now, you have to be on your own.” My husband was only 20 years old.

LE: So you were also 20 years old.

SJ: And with two children. It was quite difficult. He had to do odd jobs. He worked as a security guard outside. What could he do? He was 20 years old. No skills. Nothing. He actually was studying at university, he was in his first year of university. He was studying art. He was not a

painter; he was studying art critique. He wanted to be an art critic. So he was doing odd jobs to support us. It was very, very difficult. We went through a lot. It was not easy. Many years.

LE: Did you have other relatives here or just your parents?

SJ: I did not have anybody. I was one of the first families. With us was another family – they passed away already – who were the first to come to Rego Park.

LE: So you're one of the first Georgian-Jewish families. You know everybody!

SJ: I know everybody. After that, whoever arrived – from different places – they said, “Georgians live in Rego Park. Go to Rego.”

LE: Who said that?

SJ: Nayana. The organization directed people there.

LE: After you moved here, did you tell Nayana that you were here?

SJ: Of course!

LE: So it was really you and your family that started this Georgian-Jewish community. Wow.

SJ: You’ll learn more facts when you go to synagogue. Maybe somebody arrived earlier and they know all the facts. The synagogue is a good source to find out everything. I know that two of us, two families – us and the family that lived on the seventh floor – were the first families that arrived in New York. Lali, Tsutsi, and their daughter Maka. Both of them passed. Maka is living very well, married with children elsewhere. She's not here, but this couple passed.

LE: I'm sorry.

SJ: We were among the first families who arrived here, to Rego Park. It was all Americans who lived here.

LE: And by Americans, you mean white Americans?

SJ: I mean white Americans. Now, people of very different races live here. Many of these Americans passed away, and I have Asian neighbors, African-African neighbors, Russian neighbors. Before, the neighborhood was all American ladies – all of them passed. It was very nice. It was a good area.

We were told to be careful. I don't know who the mayor was at that time… I remember I was wearing a gold necklace, and I was going to school to learn English. “Don’t wear that necklace! It’s dangerous!” Because it was crime was up at that time, in ‘75.

LE: It was dangerous to live in Rego Park then?

SJ: Subways. The subways were dangerous, but Rego Park was quite a safe neighborhood. But the subways were dangerous, so we were told. We did not know anything. Our teachers told us, “Please be careful. You don't have to wear jewelry.” Because we did not know that somebody could come steal our stuff. But we listened. We had to be told because we did not know. I did not know where to go, what to do, what to buy. I did not know which store to go to. I did not know that Coca-Cola was bad. I was drinking Coca-Cola and Pepsi. I thought that these were great drinks.

LE: What were some of the other challenges that you faced when you moved here?

SJ: Challenges, of course. You come to America. When you are young, and you have… I don't know if I can say it… If you have talent – you draw, let’s say – you think people will recognize this, that it’s going to be appreciated. And you have dreams to have an exhibition, this, that. To be compensated. But no, it doesn’t happen. It's not like this. I tried to go to school. I went to the Parsons School of Design. A very nice chairman was there. He accepted me as an associate’s student because he knew I was from Russia, from Georgia. It was Russia then. Now, it’s Georgia, but it was the Soviet Union then. And he saw my artwork. He said, “Sizanna, we will put you in your senior year to associate with American art.” It was a wonderful experience.

LE: What does it mean to associate with American art? He wanted you to get to see what American art was?

SJ: Yes, American art, the American way of thinking. It taught me a lot. It was shocking at first, but it taught me a lot. Because we had realistic [art] school [in Georgia]. All of a sudden, I was in class. My drawing teacher was Alan Cote, a very handsome, good artist. I heard that he was a famous artist. He put an object on the table and said, “now, interpret this object.” I remember what he put – he put an umbrella on the table and said, “draw however you see the umbrella.” Oh my God, I was shocked. I was drawing a real umbrella, an actual umbrella. Nobody did this. Some put some lines; some put some color. I don't know. All different kinds of interpretation, how they imagine what this object is all about. I did not know that. Now, I’ve got it - many years later. Not right away.

LE: So you were introduced to a new style of art.

SJ: Yes. I was introduced to a new style. But they appreciated my art so much. Everybody was looking at me – how I made my portraits. All the students were standing and just watching what I was doing.

LE: How old were you?

SJ: 25.

LE: Got it. Let’s get back to the challenges that you faced when you moved to Rego Park, to America.

SJ: First of all, survival. You have to have the means to live. My husband was very supportive. He was doing all kinds of odd jobs in the beginning.

LE: And you said that you went to school.

SJ: Yes, I went to school. I wanted to go and get a master's degree, but they refused, because I had to finish college here. So this option just disappeared. I even sent my diploma from Georgia. I graduated from art school – it was actually the equivalent of high school, but it was art school. They actually gave me a degree in drawing and drafting. A teacher's degree. But it did not work in the United States.

So I worked independently, like freelance. Yes, you can say I was a freelance artist – I made my paintings, and from time to time… My husband was very supportive of me. His father was in the antique business. They had a store… He was dealing with antiques, and he helped. My husband, too - he had some business going. Eventually, he had money. This was many years ago. He bought a Medallion Taxi. Then, he sold the Medallion. He invested money in a coffee shop, and he lost all the money.

LE: Oh my God.

SJ: A big restaurant with three partners. He lost all the money because he didn't know the restaurant business. He blew all the money that we had accumulated while he was working as a driver, from after we had emigrated – from the odd jobs and whatever we had achieved. He lost it in the coffee shop business. So he had to start all over again. And he worked as a private driver for very prestigious people. A chauffeur for limousines. He worked once with Lefrak, from Lefrak City. He's a very famous guy. My husband worked with good, prominent businessmen. He was making money. He was very supportive of my art, and I had so many exhibitions. I have my biography here because I can't remember everything off the top of my head. A lot in Georgia, and in New York, too.

Mostly, I painted whatever I felt called to paint, and from time to time, I had an exhibition. My first exhibition was in Denver, Colorado at the Sloane Gallery of Art in 1981, six years after we arrived. I sold two paintings – my self-portrait and "Mother and Child." At the same time, I had a "father and daughter show" in Israel. My father was alive then.

LE: Okay, so you and he presented your artwork together.

SJ: Yes, yes. I have all of this in my memoirs.

LE: I see here that you know your show was in Denver in 1981, and then in 1983, you presented at another gallery, and then at the 168 Mercer St. Gallery. In 1981, things started to pick up.

SJ: Actually, '79. I had my first solo exhibition.

LE: What kind of works were you exhibiting?

SJ: In the beginning, it was expressionist work. Whatever I went through, my emotions, I depicted. Immigration. Mother and child. Prayer. Leaving Georgia to be in Israel, a new country. Terrorism. I depicted this in my painting. Some of it was presented in the Denver

gallery. I have this in my memoir. There was a very good review about my exhibition.

It's very hard to say it all at once, because each exhibition requires a whole story. We can go through major events, like dates and gallery names. But if you need more, it requires individual attention.

Once, I got lucky. I got a commission from very prominent people in New York. They commissioned a portrait for their foundation. I photographed them, and then I painted them. They are the founders of the Dragon Rehabilitation Center in New York. This rehabilitation center is on 99th Street and 56th East. They were patrons of the Roosevelt Hospital. Very, very prominent people. The husband's father was the founder of IBM.

They liked my painting so much that they made copies. I also painted for Forest Hills High School. They came from the school and asked how much they had to pay. I said, "you don't have to pay a penny." I'm like this. It hangs in the permanent collection in the Forest Hills lobby.

LE: When you came here, did you have some kind of special status? Did you have refugee status?

SJ: We had refugee status. Of course. That's why they gave me a green card right away. As soon as we arrived at the airport.

LE: Even though you came from Israel, you had refugee status.

SJ: Yes.

LE: Because you were from the Soviet Union originally?

SJ: Yes. We came with laissez-passer because we did not have passports yet. Temporary passports.

LE: You were mentioning all of these challenges that you were facing. Your husband's odd jobs. You were learning English as well. You were going to English class. Did anyone – the Georgian community here – provide any help?

SJ: No, no. In the beginning… we were all new here. After a few months, nobody helped us.

LE: How did you integrate into society here?

SJ: It was not so bad, because Americans were very welcoming, and maybe they recognized that I did not have many commissions. But from time to time, I did have commission work. And generally, I was already satisfied that they loved my art and that they appreciated it. I know that I'm not a commercial artist. I don't do this for a living. I'm not trying to sell it. If somebody liked how I did a portrait, they would come to me… but this was once in five or ten years. I've lived here for 48 years already. Maybe 10 commissions over those 48 years. Not

more.

LE: How often do museums contact you?

SJ: Ah, museums contact me from Georgia.

LE: But you've shown work in museums outside of Georgia too.

SJ: I have my work in the Anne Frank House in the Netherlands. And the first lady of Georgia, Saakashvili's wife, presented my work, my portrait, to the Anna Frank House directly. It was Anne Frank Days in Georgia at that time. Mikheil Saakhashvili was a guest at our synagogue.

And we know the head of protocol there, and my friend gave my picture and letter to Sandra Roelofs, the wife of Saakashvili. So Saakashvili took this letter and Anne Frank's portrait to Georgia. At that time, there was an exhibition about Anne Frank in Georgia. From the Netherlands, Ronald Leopold was visiting this event in in Georgia. And the First Lady of Georgia presented this work.

LE: What year was this?

SJ: 2013. We had contact there. It actually happened. It was very, very lucky. It was my dream to paint Anne Frank. My father gave me her book when I was 13 years old. And I was inspired.

LE: He gave it to you in the Soviet Union?

SJ: Yes, in the Soviet Union. In 2005, I actually painted two portraits of Anne Frank. One was in the Baazov Museum, the Jewish Museum in Georgia. The other one is the in Anne Frank House. Where else is my work? In Switzerland. A very prestigious, very famous doctor, Shalva Marty, has a collection of my work. He bought it in Israel.

I showed some work in Italy. My works are in Israel.

LE: It's all over the world now.

It seems like most of your art career was already here. So, how do you remember this story of immigration? What were your expectations when you came here?

SJ: I did not have any. I was a child. I think I did a lot. Whatever I achieved, whatever opportunity I had here in the United States, whatever life I had, whatever I could paint and exhibit and create – America gave me the chance to do all this. I'm very grateful to this country, and I love this country. This is my home. In the times when I left my home here and I went even to Israel, even to Georgia – as soon as I stepped a foot back in this country, I said, "thank you. I'm here. Thank you, God." Because I feel at home. I'm very appreciative of America, whatever opportunity I had, even whatever hardship we went through. We went

through lots of hardship. I'm happy, very content.

Life is not about money. You have to have a roof over your head and go on somehow. But if you do whatever you love and follow your calling, this is the most important thing in life. I would not trade this for anything. Some people don't consider me a real artist and tell me, "what kind of a life is this? You just give, give, give. You donate this and that." They don't understand that I am happy that they accept my work. And it's done with all my heart, with love. They think it's all about money, that I have to trade this work for money. For me, it can't be traded for money. You cannot put a price on it. I would rather give than talk about money, exchange money. That's how I feel.

Once in a while, there is a commission. Then you can talk about money. But when I do my creation, this is not about money. Absolutely not.

LE: So what does your life look like now? Your work, your art, your family, your relationship with Georgia and the Jewish community here.

SJ: I'm very grateful to the Georgian Jewish community. Very grateful. They've been very good to me. In 2013, the synagogue made a special evening. I had an exhibition in the synagogue. People told me, "Sizanna, we never had this kind of evening."

I'm very appreciative of my community, my synagogue. They really respect my art. This year, they published a calendar of my works. My work of Moses, my work of Abraham. They published my work hanging in museums.

LE: It seems like you're very involved in the Georgian Jewish community here.

SJ: Yes, of course.

LE: So do you go to synagogue?

SJ: I'm not religious, but I'm very respectful because I did not grow up like this. You see family who attend synagogue. But when I paint, this is my prayer. Through my painting, I pray, I repent. Everything is here. I have this outlet. This is like my home, my prayer home. For me, it can like synagogue or like home.

LE: Is it a way for you to keep in touch with your Georgian roots or heritage?

SJ: Yes, of course. I love my motherland. I keep in touch with Georgia. I love them. They are good to me. They really recognize me. I have recognition from them. They respect my art, and they are so good to me. I feel so much love from them. I have so many friends who are so respectful and so good to me. They help me in every way. If I want to send pictures [to a museum], they frame them for me, they take them to the museum. It's like PR. They write articles about me and everything. They are very good to me.

LE: Do you go back? Do you ever visit Georgia?

SJ: Twice. ‘97 and 2016. In 2016, I had a museum exhibition. Only twice in these 48 years.

LE: Do you plan to go back again?

SJ: I don't know. It depends on how I feel, on my health. I’ll need another exhibition for that.

LE: I'm sure you'll have another exhibition in Georgia.

SJ: Yes, but… If I go, I have to do something, take something, donate some pictures and everything… because I still have some paintings which actually belong to the State of Georgia. I want to find contacts for the Jewish Museum here in New York. But you have to have contacts everywhere because I have paintings which really belong to museums. My father's work. Work about the Holocaust. On Jewish themes. But you have to have contacts.

You cannot just call, you know. You have to have good PR to somehow get in touch. The right contacts. I am even thinking – it’s my dream. Life goes so fast. I’m already 68 years old, and I really think… There is a Women's Museum in Washington, D.C. I would love to donate my artwork there… because it’s a woman’s art. My life…

I depicted my life – the life of an immigrant woman. I’ve been here since I was 20. I have already lived so long and created so much. And I have a voice from the Georgian Jewish community. I feel it belongs to a museum. And if somebody is interested, you know which paintings... I would love to give them. It actually belongs to a museum because I have work which private homes have bought as decoration. My painting is not for decoration. It's a different kind of art.

So it actually belongs to a museum. But still. I even talked to my daughter and asked if we could do something because maybe tomorrow I won't be here, and my children won’t know what to do with this painting. And really, there are series of paintings which have to be in a museum. I wish for that door to be open to me. I don't want money. I don't want anything. I just know that it has to be there. For people. Because everyone, every immigrant – America is immigrants! – relates to these paintings, the feelings in my paintings.

LE: My last question is from your point of view today. Would you make the same decision to emigrate?

SJ: Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't have any regrets. I'm so grateful. I think it was a blessing, how it’s gone. Even through pain, even through turmoil – it had to be like this. Otherwise, I would not have done anything. You know, my life made me, who I am now. Whatever I went through – each step it was supposed to be that way. That's how I feel.

LE: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to what I recorded today?

SJ: I'm appreciative that you are interested. I'm very appreciative. In a way, it's very good that you let people know about me and see my art. I remember my daughter took me once to her

college. I was a guest artist there because I never had the chance to work here as an artist. I remember her children listening to me, they asked for my autograph. I had a slide show. It was a master class or something, I don't know what you call it. I was a guest artist. They took me.

People should know, people should see. Art is for people. It's not for me to paint it. I don't have to hide by the wall like this. I miss my paintings so much. I want to take them out, look at them, but I don't even have the opportunity to because I don't have space.

In the end, I'm glad that you are interested and you're working on this and you talk to me. I had a chance to talk to you, and you took some pictures, so I'm very appreciative. I'm very appreciative of each moment of my life. That's how I live now, and I'm appreciative of spending some time with you.

LE: Thank you, Sizanna.

SJ, Thank you, sweetheart.