

# Georgia

Nina Kheladze interviewed **Eldar Shengelaia**

Interview date: June 2016

*Almost all Georgian cinema of that time is allegorical, because speaking directly was not possible – memories of Eldar Shengelaia*

**Kheladze:** How would you describe your childhood?

**Shengelaia:** I had a difficult childhood, you know. My father died early, so only my mother, my two brothers and myself were left in the family. It was a time of war. Filmmaking was suspended, so my mother was left practically penniless. To earn some money, she gave concerts, lectures. We used to get up early in the morning, and I, my mother and aunt stood in line to buy kerosene. Giorgi [his brother, who was also a film maker] was younger than. My mother and granny were cooking on this kerosene stove. That lasted almost throughout the entire war. When the war was over, things got a little better, though, I was a kind of tough person as a child.

**Kheladze:** How do you see the place you grew up in?

**Shengelaia:** I was born and grew up in Tbilisi, so definitely, I see myself as a Tbilisian, as a Georgian.

**Kheladze:** How did you imagine the future, what were you dreaming of? What was the thing you were most curious about?

**Shengelaia:** First I wanted to become a woodsman. You know why? I used to visit Bakuriani (Georgian ski resort) as a child and that is where I started to dream about it; but then, Stalin announced the launch of the Hydro Technical Institute, hydropower stations, and many from our school were enrolled in the Polytechnic Institute. I studied for one and a half years there, and then I figured out that it was not my thing and I told my mother: “I want to become a (film) director.” My mother was quite concerned, telling me that few films got made, and I would be left without a job. Then my mother took me to Dodo Aleksidze (famous artist at the time) a friend of my parents. My mother thought that Dodo would say something like: “He will never make it.” I was there, doing something, and when the time came, my mother went up to him and Dodo told her: “He will make it, he will be a good director.”

**Kheladze:** Was she surprised?

**Shengelaia:** My mother was surprised at first but then she chose a programme from the VGIK (film school in Moscow). What I didn't learn at school, I learned by non-stop study at the public library, day and night. Finally, my mother and I left for Moscow. We visited a relative of my father. I went for enrolment exams the next day and as I knew that she was

so popular (Shengelaia's mother was a famous actress in Georgia), I told my mum that if she came, I'd leave. First, I went from Mayakovski to the Botanical Garden by trolleybus and then I went to the VGIK. I was standing there for a while and soon, a boy approached, telling me that a woman was waiting for me downstairs. I went down. "Mum, do you want me to leave?" I asked her. "Son, you are hungry now, let's go to Belorusskiy Vokzal, get something to eat, and then you'll be enrolled". We left. I saw that she was bringing some food and a shot of vodka. I was surprised, because my mother used to give me, Giorgi, and Tengiz, a glass of red wine for dinner. She was a real Kakhetian woman (note: Kakheti is Georgia's foremost winemaking region). And, now she was telling me to drink a shot of vodka, to eat and then I'll be enrolled. And, I was enrolled.

**Kheladze:** Why did you choose this profession?

**Shengelaia:** You know what? My father was a director, my mother was an actress: so that is the answer. So I started studying... We were taught by a very interesting person: Skvortsov, instead of Pudovkin, who had died. But we all wanted to have a master [i.e. a famous mentor as a teacher]; first my mother went to Gia Danelia (popular USSR director born in Georgia), then to Anjaparidze. Then we asked for (Sergei) Yutkevich (famous Soviet film director and screenwriter). She called him and I visited Yutkevich. He was surprised, saying that he was kicked out of the VGIK for cosmopolitanism and that they wouldn't take him back. We begged him very much and finally, notwithstanding that the VGIK administration was angry about him, Yutkevich returned. He played a great role in our development.

**Kheladze:** You've mentioned development and I wonder, apart from professional development, how your grandparents influenced your personal development?

**Shengelaia:** My grandfather died early, I never met him. My granny was a real mentor. We called her 'Babulia'. She spoke Russian. She took care of us when mother was away; she fed us, she did everything for us.

**Kheladze:** Where was she from?

**Shengelaia:** She was Polish, they were resettled here years ago and thus she was more Russian than Polish. She was the one who took me to school on the first day. Had it been my mother, there would be much fuss and buzz. She blessed me and I entered the classroom. A little girl was sitting next to me. I was 8 years old; I blushed. I felt that I was in love. When I went the next day, I stole a necklace from my mother and gave it to that girl. The girl looked at it and threw it on the desk [i.e. she rejected it]. On the third day, I was called to the teachers' room and my teacher asked me whose necklace it was. I blushed and said that it was mum's necklace. They called my mother, she came. She listened to us, and then she put a necklace on that girl. She was my first love (smiles).

**Kheladze:** Can you remember when you first travelled abroad?

**Shengelaia:** It was very weird, you know... like a test exam (he refers to the first general exam to accept students) in Bulgaria. Lialia Tabukashvili (famous Georgian critic) and I took “Unusual Exhibition” (one of Shengelaia’s most famous films) there.

We walked a lot around, and eventually Lialia wanted to visit Baba Vanga (blind fortune teller famous all over the USSR). Her friend’s children had died, but they didn’t know where (and how they had died). Lialia entered the room, I stayed outside. Baba Vanga told her she sensed a boy accompanied her, asking me to enter as well. I went in. She told us that the children drowned in open water. We went to Moscow, Lialia was anxious, but we found out that the children really did drown, in Tbilisi Sea.

**Kheladze:** And that was your first time traveling?

**Shengelaia:** It was the first time.

**Kheladze:** To Bulgaria?

**Shengelaia:** In Bulgaria

**Kheladze:** But as you said, you were studying in Moscow, so, it means that it was your first time traveling, or you didn’t perceive it as “abroad”, as it was considered the capital of the Soviet Union.

**Shengelaia:** Let me explain. We were studying in Moscow...

I was studying together with Merab Kokochashvili, Lana Ghoghoberidze, Otari Ioseliani, Sofiko Chiaureli, and my brother, though my closest friend was Aleksei Zakharov, nicknamed Liosha. I called him my third brother. So, when we graduated, me and Liosha filmed “The Legend of the Icy Heart” in Kazakhstan. When we came back there were scenes, they told us were formalistic, but they still accepted it and gave us diplomas.

Then we shot “Winter’s Tale”, with Leonov’s first appearance. So, we had shot the film, the film centre director was Fronov, and he said that this was a “Blue Bird” [i.e. a wonderful piece], that the film was good. But after he saw the film in his [mountain] cottage, he suddenly didn’t like it anymore<sup>1</sup>. I don’t know whether he personally saw it or not.

**Kheladze:** Why was the evaluation so different?

**Shengelaia:** God knows who [else] saw it at the cottage, his wife, himself or a housekeeper, but he didn’t like it. As a result, Fronov told me to pay royalties.

Me and Liosha had some money for a graduation party. Me and Ara (Ariadna Shengelaia, his first wife; he also cast her in the film “The Eccentrics”) had a little baby girl, Nato. Nato was my mother’s name (Nato Vachnadze, a famous actress in Georgian cinema). I bought a pot with this money and Ara was very happy.

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<sup>1</sup> Assumption is that he discussed it with someone whilst on his cottage and suddenly changes his mind.

**Kheladze:** Let's get back to the war again; did you talk about it with your family members, parents?

**Shengelaia:** No.

**Kheladze:** Did you feel free and safe as a child?

**Shengelaia:** Me? Yes, absolutely, sure. I want to tell you one thing: Stalin's regime caused many horrors, disasters, but there was absolute order and discipline.

**Kheladze:** Didn't you feel threatened by the purges [against political opponents]<sup>2</sup>?

**Shengelaia:** In our family, my Aunty Kira was purged. She was the wife of a famous writer, Pilniak. Pilniak was arrested and executed, and my aunt called granny, asking her to come to Moscow as soon as possible, because she was afraid that they would take Boria [Kira's son] away, as he was two years old then. Granny arrived, took Boria with her. Boria's surname should be Pilniak, but my granny gave him the surname of our grandfather – Andronikashvili.<sup>3</sup> Boria was living with us, during that decade.

My mother once visited the Kremlin and summoned up the courage to approach Stalin, personally telling him that she had nothing to say about Pilniak, but that her sister was not guilty of anything. Stalin called [Lavrenty] Beria (director of the Soviet secret police who played a major role in the purges of Joseph Stalin's opponents), and asked him to release her. So, Aunty Kira was released.

**Kheladze:** How did you feel about neighbouring countries? Which did you find the most attractive and impressive?

**Shengelaia:** Me and my wife's first overseas trip was to the USA. My wife at that time was Neli, and we shot "The Eccentrics" there. Our friend was Bobby, an American. When we arrived in New York, there were no cassettes, but only rolls of film, so they wouldn't let us. Then Bobby tried very hard and made it possible. Then we visited some universities [to show the film] and notwithstanding that I was worrying about it being the USA, a big country, "The Eccentrics" was very well accepted. That was our first trip abroad.

**Kheladze:** What did the USA give you, emotionally?

**Shengelaia:** You know what, when I first saw New York, I was astonished and Moscow seemed a village compared to it. It is a really amazing city.

**Kheladze:** How about Europe? What did you know about Europe during the Soviet Union?

**Shengelaia:** I hated maths and geometry, but I loved geography. I knew many things about France. I read *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. We staged it at home

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<sup>2</sup> Political purges against political opponents, often with individuals taken away and "disappearing" after dark. Familiar phenomenon incl. in the 1950s.

<sup>3</sup> They changed the surname to conceal the connection to his father.

together with my cousins and my cousin Gogi hit me with a stick (he shows a scar) and I still have it (smiles). That was the end of our play.

**Kheladze:** What is the meaning of home to you?

**Shengelaia:** I loved the house we used to live in, but if you told me to go there now, I wouldn't. My father, mother and grandmother spent their final days there. I have difficult memories [associated with this house].

We live here [an apartment in Tbilisi] now. It is also difficult for me, as my daughter Helene died here; these are her photos (points to the wall). When Neli and I felt really very bad, the Patriarch (highest-ranking bishops of Eastern Orthodoxy) came and told us that her soul was alive. Somehow we now know that Helene is with the Virgin Mary and someday, we will all be together.

**Kheladze:** Apart from the hard times, what makes you feel at home? How should a space inspire you to feel at home?

**Shengelaia:** It's work, the eternal flame of working and dreaming about films – my last film "The Chair" was made here (points to his working space); we screened "The Chair" in Tbilisi and some liked it, some didn't, it received strange reviews; then we screened it in London and they liked it there, but the most important thing was that the film was honoured at the NIKA in Moscow (points at the award), then it was purchased by Japan, and it was screened at Ivanov Hall, for almost three months.

**Kheladze:** Is there any ritual or tradition that makes you feel at home?

**Shengelaia:** I have a custom. I have my morning and evening prayers. I'm a believer, I have faith. I pray for peace, though, unfortunately, we never get it. I pray for my strength and the heart to make films, because this is my job, I have to make films.

**Kheladze:** We love your films too. I even wrote my thesis about your trilogy.

**Shengelaia:** Really?

**Kheladze:** And I never imagined then that it would be possible to talk one-to-one with you, for which I thank you once again. Let's continue our conversation. Have you ever in your life left or considered leaving your home?

**Shengelaia:** No, never.

**Kheladze:** Which languages are your native languages, i.e. make you feel at home?

**Shengelaia:** Georgian and Russian.

**Kheladze:** Is Europe your home?

**Shengelaia:** (smiles) Georgia is my home. I've been to Berlin many times, during Soviet times. I've also visited Paris, London, Madrid. I also visited Italy several times, I've been a jury member for the Venice Film Festival, everyone was wearing evening suits and I, the representative of the Soviet Union wore a suit jacket (smiles).

**Kheladze:** Have you ever felt alienated?

**Shengelaia:** Alienated? Well, I didn't plan to enter politics, but I met Zurab Zhvania (Ex-prime minister of Georgia) who persuaded me and so I became a vice-speaker of the parliament [in 1992]. Everything went well, but then everything was plunged into chaos (note: he refers to the Georgian Civil war ending 1993).

**Kheladze:** So, you didn't feel comfortable in politics?

**Shengelaia:** Absolutely not, it was not my business at all.

**Kheladze:** How have your ancestry and origins affected your life? Is it still important for you? You always mention Georgia, the Georgian language, Tbilisi, so this question may not be relevant, but still.

**Shengelaia:** I don't know. Have you seen "White Caravan" [Film directed by Shengelaia in 1963]? Do you remember the final scenes? Have you seen "Eliso" (silent film directed by Shengelaia's father Nikoloz Shengelaia in 1928)<sup>4</sup>? Somehow, I imitated my father, in terms of editing. It happens.

**Kheladze:** But let's look at your regional ancestry and origin. You are the offspring of a post-Soviet country, but have you ever imagined life had you had a different ancestry and origin?

**Shengelaia:** I've never thought about it and I never will. I was born here, and I shall pass away here, when it's time.

**Kheladze:** If you had the choice of a place in Europe, which place would be the most comfortable, considering your values, your profession?

**Shengelaia:** I'm staying here, in Georgia (smiles).

**Kheladze:** Now, let's get back to school and remember some stories. What was the most important thing you studied at school?

**Shengelaia:** I loved history at school, also natural sciences and geography. I hated maths. Maths was the most difficult for me.

**Kheladze:** What do you remember the best or what was your favourite school memory?

**Shengelaia:** I'll tell you now, I made my mother so angry that she decided to send me to Suvorov School [military school]. Our house had an attic and when I learned about her decision, I rushed there. I whistled and my friends came; they brought a blanket and mattress for me (smiles), I spent three days there. Then mum begged me to come back, promising she wouldn't send me anywhere. She hugged me and that was the end of the story.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018862/>

**Kheladze:** How was school in that period, an ordinary school day?

**Shengelaia:** I attended boys' school. Jaji Jorjikia, brother of my grandmother, was a school director. If someone did something bad, he would slap them. Once, when I had done something wrong, they sent me to his office and he slapped me. So I grabbed his legs, he was shouting: "I raised your father, you scoundrel, let me go" (laughs). Finally, I let him go and rushed out.

**Kheladze:** Which was your favourite book as a child?

**Shengelaia:** Books by Vazha Pshavela (famous 19th century Georgian writer), I adored Vazha, I also read the masterpieces of Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli, and Iakob Gogebashvili (all of them are famous Georgian writers). And I staged Samanishvili, as I loved that author very much.

**Kheladze:** Was there any important lecture or course that affected and changed your life?

**Shengelaia:** The lectures of Yutkevich. He demanded that we stage classics and we put on Don Quixote, the German Fogel starred. We staged one more play, I can't remember the name now, and he played the leading role and he starred, he played it so well that it was staged ten times. And then, I and Liosha put on Richard III, Kurochkin played the lead. Cinema houses didn't exist then, and there was a Hotel Sovetskaya, where it was staged twice and people liked it.

**Kheladze:** You were studying in Moscow then, it was probably quite expensive, right? How was education financed in those times?

**Shengelaia:** No, no. After enrolling, there was no tuition fee. You had a small scholarship and lived on it.

**Kheladze:** So, there was no tuition? No fee for education?

**Shengelaia:** That was the case during the Soviet era.

**Kheladze:** Did you ever question what they taught you during your school and university years? How correct everything they taught you was?

**Shengelaia:** Absolutely!

**Kheladze:** Were you ever afraid of anything, when at school?

**Shengelaia:** Afraid? No. Do you know 'idling'? We went to mess around in Alexandrov Park. We were playing "Donkey and Its Patron", we were wrestling, fighting. We had one friend Merab Varnazov, he challenged me to fight and smashed me well. Then we became best friends, I mean, after my beating (smiles). Then he changed his surname to a Georgian one - from Varnazov to Varnazi.

**Kheladze:** How long did you study and was there any time you paused or terminated your studies?

**Shengelaia:** No, It was non-stop.

**Kheladze:** 11 years at school. Then you were enrolled at an institute, majoring in hydro engineering.

**Shengelaia:** Yes, and then VGIK. I'll tell you one thing, when I finished the first semester, my mother arrived. She stayed with Aunty Fati. When I came home, I showed her my student card with excellent academic grades and only one 'good'. She doubted it, because I was not successful at school and she went to the VGIK. The Dean was Tavriziani then and she asked him whether the card was genuine or not. "Natalia Georgievna, this is correct" (speaks in Russian).

**Kheladze:** You mentioned that you loved Geography and studied it well. Name the countries you were informed about.

**Shengelaia:** About all of them.

**Kheladze:** What did they teach you about European countries?

**Shengelaia:** The most interesting lessons about the European countries were about France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England – this was about Europe.

**Kheladze:** You spoke Georgian in school, right?

**Shengelaia:** Sure, and they taught Russian, as well.

**Kheladze:** Was there any foreign language other than Russian?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, French.

**Kheladze:** Was it interesting for you to learn these foreign languages, or did you think that, when one knows Russian, French was not necessary?

**Shengelaia:** This country (meaning the USSR) was so isolated, that it was my mistake that I didn't learn French, it was unimaginable that we could ever go abroad.

**Kheladze:** And you might need French someday.

**Shengelaia:** Of course.

**Kheladze:** Which values did you reconsider after you grew up? Values that you'd inherited.

**Shengelaia:** Values. A man must have honour, work and think about family, friends and you know what? When you make a film and it is successful, this is one brick in the development of the entire country. Besides, everyone must think about doing their job and then all of Georgia will flourish.

**Kheladze:** Was there anything people told you as a child that this or that was very important and necessary, and when you grew up, you found out that it wasn't so important after all? Something they said you or your ancestors did.

**Shengelaia:** When we were celebrating May 1<sup>st</sup> (International workers day), we [the children] were locked in the Sport Palace and they taught us to shout – Long live Stalin! Long live the Party! We used to go to the circus area, there was a tribune, now there is a monument and there were small houses round about, so, we were standing there and shouting: Long live Stalin! Long live Georgia!

It was mandatory, but as a matter of fact I've seen Stalin (alive) only in the movies, Gelovani played his role and then [later] I actually saw him in the coffin! Imagine, Stalin died and the entire Institute were staring at Gelovani [watching the movie] and everyone cried. Then we went away, split.

There is "Trubni Ploshadz" in Moscow, it was freezing outside... It was March 4<sup>th</sup> [and big crowds on the streets]. There was a slope and people tumbled down. I helped a little boy to get out (he dragged the boy from the fallen mass) and brought him to his parents, in the yard. I went to my halls of residence and fell asleep. Ivan Ivanish woke me up, telling me to hurry to Postpresso. I took the train feeling very sleepy. I arrived, there was a huge car outside, a huge wreath and many students, I was the only Georgian. We left. There is a palace in front of Hotel Moscow, we went in, brought the wreath and put it there. They fixed the red ribbon. I was standing there and I saw a handsome old man with freckles in the coffin - Stalin.

I want to mention that Mikheil Chiaureli was filming the funeral [9<sup>th</sup> March 1953]. Have you ever been to Moscow? So there is BUM and we went there. Red Square is big in general, but as it was completely empty, I saw it as boundless. They brought in the coffin, it was followed by the Politburo and the First Secretaries of the communist countries and so on. They came and stood the coffin up on its end, I don't know whether it was tied down or what. Then Beria announced: "Последний парад, Маршала Сталина, Фельд маршала Сталина" – "The last parade of Marshal Stalin, Field Marshal Stalin". The machinery followed, the coffin was brought in and that's how it ended.

**Kheladze:** When you heard about the death of Stalin, what was the reaction of your generation, the youth?

**Shengelaia:** You know what, everything changed quickly. Information leaked. We learned that we were leaving a terrible situation. Khrushchev did many good things, as well as bad ones, but the important thing was that he destroyed the Gulag [system] and released people. It was his achievement. Then he messed up and so on.

**Kheladze:** You have very interesting memories. What was the most important lesson that you learned from your parents?

**Shengelaia:** I inherited diligence from my mother. I've already mentioned it, but I shall repeat that my mother raised us in extreme poverty. She raised us as individuals, humans. She first sent Tengiz to Moscow and he became an engineer. Then she sent me there.

Unfortunately, when Giorgi's time came, she was not alive, though Giorgi went there as well and became a director.

**Kheladze:** What was your message to your children, as a parent?

**Shengelaia:** To my children? Well, I always tell them to live with love, to work in their chosen direction and this will have the best results.

**Kheladze:** Do you remember your first job? How did you get it?

**Shengelaia:** My first workplace was at [USSR film studio] MOSFILM. When I and Liosha finished "Winter's Tale", we wanted to film "Nose" by Gogol. Ivan Pirev was the head of the Union and when the Union gathered and we handed over the script, he threw it away and shouted: you have to make a modern film. It was the moment I realised that there was nothing left for me to do there anymore [i.e. at MOSFILM, the state film studio]. Liosha and me went to the Chancellery. I told them that I wanted to go to Tbilisi. "Are you crazy? Go and take a week's break", they said. I got back in one week and told them that I was going to Tbilisi and I left!

**Kheladze:** When did you realise what you wanted to do with your life?

**Shengelaia:** Well, after my studies. Then after my studies, it was time, when I went into politics, but then I gave it up. My job is filmmaking.

**Kheladze:** What did you buy with your first salary?

**Shengelaia:** I bought a flower pot for Ariadna (his first wife).

**Kheladze:** How do you think you did? Did you reach your goals?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, I've reached some of them, but I also missed some. I think that it is not possible to achieve everything in one life, you have to try and fight and work, then you might achieve something.

**Kheladze:** What is it that you want to do most?

**Shengelaia:** Cinema! Film.

**Kheladze:** Which achievement are you most proud of?

**Shengelaia:** You know, it's hard to talk about, movies are like children and some like "Blue Mountains", some like "Samanishvili", or "Extraordinary Exhibition". It depends on the viewers and film critics.

**Kheladze:** And for you?

**Shengelaia:** For me, all are my children.

**Kheladze:** Have you ever thought that your contributions and your work were not properly appreciated?

**Shengelaia:** The last one was recently, Neli (Eldar Shengelaia's second wife) was there as well, I was featured in "Cannes Classics" for the second time. Neither the Georgian

Ministry of Culture nor the government made a single call. Ordinary people meet me in the street, greeting me. One woman hugged me in the street, saying: "Congratulations on being featured in Cannes Classics!" You know, it is strange, but in the Soviet Union, when "Blue Mountains" won the prize in Kyiv, I got a call at 8am that Eduard Shevardnadze wanted to talk to me. He was the Secretary of the Central Committee then and he said: "Eldar, your achievement is the achievement of Georgian cinema and Georgian culture." Why have these gestures been lost? Because today, culture in Georgia is not that important. They think about money. I don't know if I'm right or not. Ha? Am I right? (smiles)

**Kheladze:** How did your work affect your family?

**Shengelaia:** (laughs) Hard, very hard. (smiles).

**Kheladze:** What was the most difficult?

**Shengelaia:** (He smiles at his wife, who would come in periodically during the interview.) She is my producer now. She is the producer of "The Chair". Everything that I film in the future, will be hers too. She manages all the income; I have no idea about it. (Still smiling).

**Kheladze:** Are you certain that this is the right decision?

**Shengelaia:** Absolutely certain.

**Kheladze:** Can you remember when you first used a computer?

**Shengelaia:** Never. I don't use a computer.

**Kheladze:** Even now?

**Shengelaia:** Even now. (Points towards his wife. Neli adds that she does everything).

You know what, Gia (Giorgi0 Danelia used to say: "Я человек той эпохи" – "I'm the man of that era as well" (smiles).

**Kheladze:** We know that you worked in Russia, and in other post-Soviet countries. What about the European countries, did you work there?

**Shengelaia:** No. Only part of "Express Information" was made in Germany. That's it.

**Kheladze:** If you had such an opportunity, and if the political space of that time was more open, would you have been interested in working in Europe for a while? Or even in America?

**Shengelaia:** If that were the case, of course I would go. But there was no such opportunity.

**Kheladze:** Would you still choose this profession if you were 20 now?

**Shengelaia:** I would do it the same way, I have no other way. (smiles)

**Kheladze:** What advice would you give to the young people who have chosen this path now, the path that you took a long time ago?

**Shengelaia:** I would advise them to read books. Unfortunately, people read less today because there is TV, Facebook and so on. They have to read the book, because the script is literature, and if the script is right, you can say that the film is as good as made. You should also visit museums to see the work of artists, both Georgians and foreigners. Attend concerts. They must love music. All these together, script, music, image, painting, creates cinema.

**Kheladze:** What did your parents talk about at the dining table in your childhood?

**Shengelaia:** The only thing I can tell you is that we first discovered cigarettes near the Pioneer Palace, as it was then called. Me and my cousin Gogi and others, Geliashvili were there and suddenly, Gogi's face changed. I looked up and saw my mother coming. I threw away the cigarette. My mother asked me: "Are you coming to dinner?" Of course, and I went directly home. I sat down for dinner and my mother passed me a "Record", it was a cigarette, first she gave it to Tengiz, then to me. I said, Mom, I don't smoke. "I saw you." After that, I've never smoked at all!

**Kheladze:** Who were the big names of that period? I mean, whose name did you hear the most after Stalin?

**Shengelaia:** I when it comes to movies, Fellini, for example. I love his films very much. Chaplin, of course. Godard. I don't remember who my parents were talking about.

**Kheladze:** What were the main political events of your youth?

**Shengelaia:** The main political event was Stalin's death, and then not only changes affecting me, but also the total transformation of [Soviet] society [after Stalin's death].

**Kheladze:** How did you get through this transformation period? You recently mentioned that everything seemed to have changed.

**Shengelaia:** You know what, almost all Georgian cinema is an allegory of that time. Because you couldn't speak directly. For example, "The Eccentrics" was perceived as a fairy tale, but in fact, it's an ode to freedom! The same situation pertained to other film directors.

**Kheladze:** Was there any high-profile event that affected your personal life?

**Shengelaia:** I can't remember any.

**Kheladze:** What was your first connection to politics? For example, did you take part in demonstrations? Did you join a public protest?

**Shengelaia:** Not really. I was elected to the Supreme Council. It was horrible! Because I have to tell you that I was a former MP during the Soviet Union. It was terrible then, because you didn't understand half of what they were talking about, but still, you had to put your hand up.

**Kheladze:** Do you remember any political slogans?

**Shengelaia:** I can't remember any.

**Kheladze:** Do you remember any political debate that forced you to show a position? For example, have you been particularly sensitive to any political issue?

**Shengelaia:** (Asks his wife) Which one was that?

Neli: "April 9th."

**Shengelaia:** I was the only one from Georgia in the April 9th Commission (In the spring of 1989, Georgians took to the streets to demand independence from the Soviet Union. At the peak of the demonstrations, many thousands of people -- some of them on hunger strike -- gathered in central Tbilisi. On April 9, Soviet Interior Ministry troops moved in to crush the peaceful protests, killing at least 20 people and leaving hundreds injured or poisoned by gas. The crackdown became one of the turning points in the final years of the Soviet Union)<sup>5</sup>. I have to tell you, it was a scary fight. Sobchak spoke, told the truth. Then the Prosecutor's Office came out and said terrible things: they tore each other apart, strangled each other. There was Merab Berdzenishvili, he shouted and left. Then all our delegation followed. I was thinking, what can I do? Should I go or stay? (Shengelaia is part of a delegation representing Georgia in this open hearing, and is demanding an apology, which was unprecedented). And we see the Russian opposition is coming together with Yeltsin, followed by the Armenian, Azeri delegations (different parts of USSR were represented at the hearing). Then came Shevardnadze, Afanasiev and then Gorbachev. He came and asked what to do to make the Georgian people happy. Temur Chkheidze (Georgian stage director) and I come up with a resolution [to demand an apology]. We gave it to Gorbachev with some changes, but the core was kept. It was the only time when the resolution underlined that the authorities were to blame! There was no such thing in history. I think we won then.

**Kheladze:** What shaped your political views? What was the foundation of your political views?

**Shengelaia:** I was not a politician and I consider Zurab Zhvania (Former prime minister of Georgia) as my teacher. It was still a drive towards the European roads. And that was probably the best thing to do.

**Kheladze:** How much control did you have over the course of your life? Did history ever force you to change your plans? How about a feeling that something in your life went completely wrong?

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<sup>5</sup> In the spring of 1989, Georgians took to the streets to demand independence from the Soviet Union. At the peak of the demonstrations, many thousands of people -- some of them on hunger strike -- gathered in central Tbilisi. On April 9, Soviet Interior Ministry troops moved in to crush the peaceful protests, killing at least 20 people and leaving hundreds injured or poisoned by gas. The crackdown became one of the turning points in the final years of the Soviet Union. [Source.](#)

**Shengelaia:** Of course, I can't tell you exactly, but I guess I missed something. Sometimes when I watch my films, I think this scene shouldn't have been shot or it should have been cut out. It is a normal process.

**Kheladze:** How much control do you have over your life? Do you feel that what is happening in your life is exactly what you wanted it to be and that you were in control of it?

**Shengelaia:** Not ideal, but let bygones be bygones and that is the course of my life. It was not ideal.

**Kheladze:** When you were young, what did war mean to you? You are a person who has seen civil war as well.

**Shengelaia:** I was in Sokhumi (the capital of the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia, which is now occupied by Russia), too, by the way together with Buba Kikabidze, Otar Meghvinetukhutsesi (famous Georgian artists), many things were collected in the film union and we took a flight [to Sokhumi].

You know, what the plane was like? There were no seats, we were standing. We got there, of course, and we met with the soldiers. Nobody paid me attention, because "Tutashkhia", "Mimino" had arrived (smiles) ("Tutashkhia", "Mimino" are movie characters, those movies were very popular that time). We distributed things among Abkhazians too. And when we got back, there were so many people that we could barely get on the plane and the pilot was screaming that they couldn't take off, someone had to leave the plane. We were in the back, so, we couldn't get out. The plane took off. Suddenly, we heard some noise. When we arrived in Tbilisi, we realised that the tires were torn. So, we were at risk of crashing. Finally, our plane landed safely. Everyone got out of the plane, including the three of us. There was no electricity then. There was a truck, we begged the driver to take us, so, we reached the centre of Tbilisi.

**Kheladze:** What did war mean to you then?

**Shengelaia:** You know what I saw, it was horrible! In general, it seems that humanity will never stop doing it, but one may wish, I wish that mankind would live without war. That would be ideal.

**Kheladze:** Do you have any memories of crossing the European border? When you first crossed the Iron Curtain during the Soviet era.

**Shengelaia:** My wife, Helen (daughter), and I stayed with Gocha Chogovadze, he was the ambassador in Paris back then. Of course, when I first saw Paris, it was wonderful! Champs-Élysées. I took Helen to Disneyland. These things were absolutely different, absolutely. And of course, it was the biggest joy.

**Kheladze:** When did you first vote, if you remember?

**Shengelaia:** I think the first time I voted was in Year 11. You know, it was Stalin's time then, you have to go there, and cast your vote. When I got there, I saw that there was a commission and there was a man there, who kept writing, writing down a text. People were too afraid to write against Stalin, everyone would be arrested. He finally came out, it turned out that he wrote a poem about Stalin (laughs). Then I went to deposit the ballot and that was my first vote.

**Kheladze:** Do you have that feeling in your life that your voice is heard properly? You said that Georgian cinema had a very successful period, a period of allegoric storytelling. This form of storytelling allowed the voices of you and your colleagues being heard and understood, regardless of form (note: Georgia cinema developed a unique narrative film language which was told in parables and myths – partially in order to avoid Soviet censorship when dealing with contemporary problems).

**Shengelaia:** I can tell you that the biggest victory in the Georgian cinema was when 100 Georgian films were shown in the Pompidou, in Paris. No other republic had that chance. Georgian films ran for three months. It was a great victory because we are a small country and there are big filmmaking countries around: France, Germany, the United States, Hollywood, and at that time no republic had screened 100 films in France.

**Kheladze:** When was it?

**Shengelaia:** In 1988. It was a silent movie: "Eliso", "Salt for Svanetia", "Arsena", "Crusaders" and others, as well as the films of our generation and younger.

**Kheladze:** Do you have a feeling now that your voice is being heard? But not only from the point of view of art.

**Shengelaia:** No one cares about my voice. What can I do? So here I am locked in this room.

**Kheladze:** What have you been most overwhelmed about in recent years? What has had the biggest emotional impact in recent years?

**Shengelaia:** Helen's passing (speaks with a voice of sadness). You know what, I love my daughter Nato very much, I love Katia, Helen was the youngest daughter, she was a little different. She studied very well, played the guitar, sang, wrote poems, studied in Germany, and then studied in San Francisco. She was so successful you can't imagine, and then there was an accident. She had a car accident and died.

**Kheladze:** What do the older daughters do?

**Shengelaia:** They are at home most of the time. Nato lives with her mother, Ara. Katia is married to Levan Jugeli and has two children, Luka and Nato. Nato starred in my film "The Chair". Luka was a producer, along with Neli.

**Kheladze:** What does it mean to you to be a citizen?

**Shengelaia:** Citizen, you know, it's not just a phrase, you really have to love your homeland, you have to work to give something to your homeland, to add your "brick" to strengthen it. Not just one person, but everyone should do that. Love of homeland is not a word, it is work to do. Work and only work.

**Kheladze:** You mentioned that your wife helps you a lot and she is your producer now. What do you have disagreements about?

**Shengelaia:** No, we don't have such a thing. I want to tell you one thing, my slogan is a quote from my father's poem: "My heart was in my chest, like a tiger in a cage". Is it good? (smiles and repeats) "My heart was in my chest, like a tiger in a cage." The heart must work, the heart is important, it feeds the body.

**Kheladze:** What protest today would make you go out into the street?

**Shengelaia:** I don't know right now, I can't tell you exactly, but if I see something terrible is happening, how can I stay home. It is impossible. I hope it doesn't happen.

**Kheladze:** Who are the friends you can trust in your difficult moments?

**Shengelaia:** Now? Imeda Kakhiani is my friend, Gabiskira is my friend. Tamar Sharikadze is my school friend. Iviko Sakvarelidze. Unfortunately, many of my friends, Karlo Gabunia, Archil Asatiani, and many more passed away.

**Kheladze:** Have you ever had such loyal and credible friends abroad?

**Shengelaia:** No, I don't have a single one now.

**Kheladze:** You said that Zurab Zhvania (Ex-prime minister. He is also known for his pro-Europeanness, incl. the famous phrase "I am Georgian, and therefore I am European") was in many ways your mentor and you also mentioned that the political foundation for you was to move towards Europe. When do you feel you are European? Under what circumstances?

**Shengelaia:** First I'm Georgian, it's a real thing. Striving for Europe, for European values is still justified, and does not mean that we give up Georgian values.

**Kheladze:** Is there any public occurrence or national feature that while in Georgia makes you feel that you are part of European values?

**Shengelaia:** Now if I tell you that I feel it, that's not true. This is more of a striving. I think, that perhaps our generation will pass and the next generation will already embrace those values, without losing Georgian values as well. Those should be merged in the future.

**Kheladze:** Do you feel you have set the right course for the next generation? Do you see your role in this process?

**Shengelaia:** I have done as much as I could ... but there is more to do.

**Kheladze:** Do you trust European institutions and politicians?

**Shengelaia:** I can't answer, I have no relationship with them. (laughs) It's up to politicians.

**Kheladze:** How do you feel when you sing or listen to a national anthem?

**Shengelaia:** If anything is rich in Georgian culture, it's Georgian polyphonic music. I love it very much. Sometimes I sing too, but among family members.

**Kheladze:** As for the national songs of different European countries, do you know their culture?

**Shengelaia:** Of course, I do! For example, the Italian song is excellent. Spanish culture, it's brilliant. The culture of every country is a value. It creates a culture of all mankind, so to say. And I like this or don't like it, that's not right.

**Kheladze:** What do you think does it mean to be an old man in Europe?

**Shengelaia:** I don't know (smiles) about old people in Europe. As for the old men, although I am 86 years old, I still do not feel that I am old (smiles).

**Kheladze:** Do you remember your first flight?

**Shengelaia:** My first flight was to Moscow. It was not the way it is now, we were sitting side by side (gestures) so that people were looking at each other.

**Kheladze:** What other emotions did you have after the first flight?

**Shengelaia:** I was scared so much that I felt sick, I had a very bad reaction to the flight. Now I fly very easily, but Neli is very scared. She holds my hand. I am not afraid. Once we were flying to America, Neli told me that when we crash, we will be eaten by sharks (laughs and looks at his wife).

**Kheladze:** Do you remember the first foreigner you met? In this case, not a Soviet citizen.

**Shengelaia:** Many foreigners studied with us then, including a German, Fogel. It was the first foreigner I met. He was a good man. He played Don Quixote. And then in Berlin, I met him, Berlin was still divided then. Then, when I visited Berlin again, I was told that he died.

**Kheladze:** Did you find anything annoying while traveling in Europe?

**Shengelaia:** No, I didn't.

**Kheladze:** Which European countries haven't you visited yet?

**Shengelaia:** Many, probably (smiles). I haven't been to Norway. When I was in Sweden, we took "Express Information" there. By the way, I have to tell you that there was screening at 9am, I thought there would be few people, but the hall was crowded. The film was well-received. It was kind of weird.

I visited Egypt, too. They screened "Samanishvili's Stepmother" and it won the prize. It received two awards: visual and script.

**Kheladze:** Which is the soundtrack of your life, or which movies or songs describe your life better?

**Shengelaia:** Generally, it is the polyphony. Well, without the cinema there is Chaplin.

**Kheladze:** Did Chaplin have a huge impact on you?

**Shengelaia:** Of course!

**Kheladze:** What do you think, what does not belong to Europe?

**Shengelaia:** I do not know that. One thing I have to say is that when I took "Blue Mountains" I thought that this film is about the Soviet Union and Georgia. I went to India, we showed the film, I was told it was about India. Then we went to Vienna and they told me that this movie is about Vienna. Then when we first showed the film at the Cannes festival, the Cannes festival director told me that if he wrote a letter to the French Ministry of Culture, he would not receive a response either, so this problem [the workings of the bureaucracy are the centre of the movie] exists not only here, but the problem is common, it existed before, it does now, and will do in the future. It is global.

**Kheladze:** There is an opinion that artists are rebuilding the bridges broken by the politicians, do you agree with that?

**Shengelaia:** An artist can't change politics, but an artist can create an environment for making something right in the country.

Here is one thing I will tell you about censorship. The film "Extraordinary Exhibition" that I made was very well received in Tbilisi. People were laughing. It was accepted, normal. Rezo Gabriadze and I flew to Moscow. Romanov was chairman of the Commission then. Imagine, there is a small screening. It is a Georgian version, Rezo was interpreting. There was a man was sitting there, never even smiled. He is writing down continuously. It ends and he tells me: "The movie didn't work. I wrote down the notes: "Come tomorrow at 5 o'clock, and if you fix the issues, it will still be an average move".

We came and sat there, waiting. He didn't show up until 8pm. He came at 8 and asked us to come in. We entered his room. I saw that the table was set, I was surprised that the table is set for us. He was searching for something, he could not find, then someone calls from Cottage House, he answered and talked and tells him to send something. In short, finally, the man came in, it was the French attaché. We realised that a table was set for him. We were called out: "Cut out the scene, where your hero is screaming and swearing, this is an anti-Soviet scene." I arrived in Tbilisi, I cut it from the positive, but kept it on the negative. I took it, showed it and that's how I saved the film.

Some things like that happened sometimes, not just to me, but to others as well. It was a constant struggle! Now the problem is different - no censorship, but no money either.

Georgian cinema is undergoing a difficult time. The film centre is poorly funded. And in my opinion, the "Georgian Film" [Georgian state company] is in good condition: there is

technical equipment, there are pavilions to shoot. If I were the Minister of Culture, I would fund that too, and if there were two sources, there would surely be good, medium and bad quality films. But I'm not a minister. No one invites me (laughs).

**Kheladze:** Is there any work of art that changed your life?

**Shengelaia:** It is difficult to name a single example, but during my stay in Italy, I saw Michelangelo. That was wonderful. We saw Donatello. Italy is a wonderful country and you will be surprised to find so many things.

**Kheladze:** Which domestic appliances have changed your life?

**Shengelaia:** The telephone, of course. Mobile.

**Kheladze:** Do you remember your first experience of a mobile phone? I mean with the world that was revolutionary after the collapse of the Soviet Union?

**Shengelaia:** I don't remember exactly when, but it was introduced into our country as well and used my mobile. (His wife joins the conversation) Neli: Experience is Yes and No. (both smile)

**Kheladze:** You said you were taught French at school, but you didn't learn. You know Russian and of course, Georgian – native. Do you speak any other languages?

**Shengelaia:** No, but Neli is fluent in English, Georgian and Armenian.

**Kheladze:** Didn't you want to, or you didn't have time?

**Shengelaia:** As I told you I made a mistake not to learn it, definitely.

**Kheladze:** The next is about the phone, television and the internet. When did you use a standard, landline phone for the first time?

**Shengelaia:** I remember it from childhood, but then, you know, we had a small house phone. We were already using the usual phones then.

**Kheladze:** What would you say on television? You are a cinema man, for you, a television probably has a special role.

**Shengelaia:** I first saw a TV set in Moscow. They brought the TV for the first time, but you know what it was like? It had a screen and water inside. This was the first TV set. I was watching it. Then it was changed.

**Kheladze:** How about the internet?

**Shengelaia:** It doesn't exist for me (Neli joins the conversation). Neli: He knows nothing about it.

**Kheladze:** What was the most common joke of your generation or youth? What did you laugh about, when you met?

**Shengelaia:** I don't really remember.

**Kheladze:** About collective farming or what?

**Shengelaia:** We were always joking around the table, laughing, but I don't remember any specific jokes.

**Kheladze:** What day of the year do you especially celebrate and what does it mean to celebrate specially?

**Shengelaia:** New Year's, birthdays, funerals, Easter.

**Kheladze:** What is happening at that moment, what makes this day special and different?

**Shengelaia:** Lately, Neli and I go to church more. We hold a birthday party at home, or if it's a friend's birthday, we visit them and so on.

**Kheladze:** So you spend more time in the family environment?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, in the family.

**Kheladze:** Do you have any special tradition for the New Year?

**Shengelaia:** We used to hide gifts [under the tree] for our toddler before; for a long time, the child was thinking that Santa Claus was coming up and down the stairs, and she wanted to see him. She was a child already but we continued the lie.

**Kheladze:** Did you or your parents ever take part in ritual processions? For example, a religious one.

**Shengelaia:** During the Soviet Union, grandmother used to take us to church. Of course, we didn't understand any of it, but our grandmother used to say: "If you cheat on your mother or do something bad, God will punish you." It was such an early and important memory.

**Kheladze:** Did your Polish grandmother tell you this?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, Babulia. That's what we called her.

**Kheladze:** The Iron Curtain - How did you find out about interesting works of art? About movies, music, works of literature – everything that was behind this Iron Curtain?

**Shengelaia:** I travelled. We went to festivals. Yes, in 1968, I travelled to New York, putting on "The Eccentrics" there.

**Kheladze:** You still had the opportunity to cross these borders, despite the isolation.

**Shengelaia:** Yes! You know what, to tell the truth, I travelled a lot during the Soviet Union. Now, this situation is different. Sometimes you might miss the Soviet Union. It's a paradox!

**Kheladze:** What was it that you liked about your foreign colleagues or wanted to have as well? For example, when you travelled to New York or any European country and met a colleague, what opportunities did they have that you also would have liked to have?

**Shengelaia:** The League of Directors (union of film directors worldwide) invited us once, I was not alone, Mikhalkov was there, and Kulijanov. You know, we entered the place, it wasn't an apartment, but it was a palace instead. Imagine, how a Soviet director could have, what they had. It was really surprising. But then it would be forgotten.

**Kheladze:** Do you think your life would have changed if you had experienced certain movies, music or performances at the time?

**Shengelaia:** I don't think so... (pauses, tries to think) no.

**Kheladze:** After all, is freedom a relative concept for you?

**Shengelaia:** Freedom is a very broad concept. Some understand it differently. Freedom is when you are free inside yourself. In my opinion, there is no ideal freedom. That's my opinion, of course.

**Kheladze:** What is freedom for you?

**Shengelaia:** Freedom is when you work when you are involved in filmmaking. When I don't think about anything at that time. When I am free in creativity.

**Kheladze:** And in that creativity, when someone tries to control you, you always find ways to avoid it, if there are cases, when.

**Shengelaia:** I try to stay free in my work.

**Kheladze:** At which point in your life did you want your freedom most?

**Shengelaia:** (smiles) When it's difficult to say, maybe always.

**Kheladze:** You may have always wanted freedom, but what was the moment you specifically wished to be free. You lived through a very exciting time.

**Shengelaia:** You know, we fought for freedom. For example, what I've told you about April 9th. After those events, I requested the first meeting. There was a film director Smirnov, he was the chairman. The meeting was held at the Cinema House. Lana Ghoghoberidze, Merab Kokochashvili, Rezo Tabukashvili<sup>6</sup> were there. There, I said that Georgia would never give up its freedom! It was for the very first time [that anyone said this publicly]. I'm not trying to praise myself. People were listening, even applauded. That's how things have changed.

Note: His wife joins the conversation and reminds him of the exact quote, and Eldar Shengelaia continues - Georgia was annexed in 1921 and the Georgian people will never tolerate that!

Neli: It was in 1989. That's exactly when he said.

**Kheladze:** That means you said it during the Soviet Union, right?

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<sup>6</sup> A list of very well-known artists from that period.

**Shengelaia:** Neli continues - Yes. There were many foreign journalists, there were Russians as well. Eldar Shengelaia adds - by the way, we brought there the cassettes. We brought a lot and the journalists, Americans, French took them and so it was spread all over the world.

**Kheladze:** But how did you dare do that at the time?

**Shengelaia:** He is a free person [Neli answers]. [Eldar continues] We found courage! It was already necessary to say that! It couldn't have been otherwise.

**Kheladze:** Did you feel that there was already the basis?

**Shengelaia:** No, not for sure. We felt something, but we didn't know exactly. Everything could have turned out badly. The coup took place during the Soviet Union, but things could go wrong. But it was an essential need.

**Kheladze:** So where do you draw the line when it comes to freedom? Is there a limit?

**Shengelaia:** There is no limit. There is no limit. Freedom is such a phenomenon, that humanity must always fight for freedom. The constant struggle is freedom. The notion that we have won and that the fight for freedom is over does not exist, it will never happen.

**Kheladze:** Have you ever limited someone else's freedom?

**Shengelaia:** No, never.

**Kheladze:** Have you always needed to fight for freedom?

**Shengelaia:** Fight. Only fight.

**Kheladze:** In the years that passed, how has the perception of freedom changed for you?

**Shengelaia:** No, it hasn't.

**Kheladze:** We discussed when your first left your homeland, what was the reaction of your parents, in this case your mother? She accompanied you, but then she returned to Georgia. What was your mother's reaction?

**Shengelaia:** My mother's reaction? That was constant concern.

You know what, when I finished my first year, my mother arrived; you know Temiko Chirgadze, he performed in "Blue Mountains", he was my friend. He was a military doctor in a different city and I, together with my friends visited him; I told my mother that I was going. My mother told me: you know what, if you don't return today, I shall not fly back to Tbilisi.

I went there, there was a small Russian house, a table was set, we sang, read some poems and slept. What a fate I had. I used to sleep so deeply that everybody always tried to wake me up, and then, I lay in bed at midnight and woke up at 3am. I wish I slept until morning (sadly). I woke up, I woke up Temiko and told him that I was going to Moscow by train, as I had promised my mother. My mother was everything for me and I took a

train. I arrived to see my mother. There were Arlova and Alexandrova, friends from Venice, very famous actresses and film director.

Then, Tengiz and I saw her off, she got on the bus and went away. On the next day, I was at the VGIK, someone was calling me. Aunty Fati called me and asked me to come over as soon as possible. I arrived, there was Sergei Gerasimov, a friend of my parents. He told me that my mother had died in an air accident.

Gerasimov gave us some money, took us to the train, we were travelling for three days. I kept thinking that this was a mistake, but when I came home in Mtskheta (small city close to Tbilisi), the entire film studio was there (his mother was a national treasure, and everyone wanted to attend the service). They took us home and we said our last goodbyes to my mother. The Pantheon was very different then, when we came there, there were many people, pushing us. I told them to let me through, she was my mother after all and they answered back, that she was theirs too. So, we buried her. My father was buried at Vera then and, later, I and Giorgi reburied her. Now they are together!

**Kheladze:** You said if you hadn't come back. Do you think that if you hadn't come back, she wouldn't have left?

**Shengelaia:** She wouldn't fly, she really wouldn't fly! But it seems that was fate.

**Kheladze:** What do borders mean to you, or what were the borders in the Soviet era, which impeded you in doing something?

**Shengelaia:** I've already said and I will repeat, it was unimaginable that you would go beyond these boundaries then. We already had the feeling that we were born here, we would be here forever, and we would never see it again. Then it was a fact.

**Kheladze:** Where do you go to think?

**Shengelaia:** You know what, thinking is a constant thing, a condition. Maybe you are watching a movie. And when I am watching a movie, then I am thinking about it, I will write down something from it. Associations are coming. You may wake up thinking about something while sleeping. Thinking is constant, the head is working, thinking and thinking.

**Kheladze:** Do you need a special place or space or music where you feel better and more relaxed with your thoughts?

**Shengelaia:** Music.

**Kheladze:** What do you listen to?

**Shengelaia:** I listen to different music. Georgian, maybe foreign and then interesting thoughts are coming.

**Kheladze:** Was there a moment when you couldn't think?

**Shengelaia:** I don't think so. When you are sleeping maybe (smiles).

**Kheladze:** Do you work with yourself on your freedom of thought?

**Shengelaia:** I do, but it is still a constant moment.

**Kheladze:** Do you need to experience captivity to fully appreciate freedom of thought?

**Shengelaia:** Absolutely!

**Kheladze:** You had to work under extreme censorship but created masterpieces under it. If not for such captivity, would such masterpieces have been created?

**Shengelaia:** It's a paradox, but they wouldn't have been made! Captivity gave us the impulse to create something exciting and interesting. This is a real paradox.

**Kheladze:** And did that restricted and inescapable situation inspire you to find a new way to speak up?

**Shengelaia:** Definitely.

**Kheladze:** When you were 20, were you optimistic about the future, or did you have some fears?

**Shengelaia:** Absolute optimism!

**Kheladze:** As you tell it, it seems that you were the one to make the decisions.

**Shengelaia:** Definitely.

**Kheladze:** Mother didn't want you to be a film director, but you still tried and became a brilliant film director.

**Shengelaia:** But my mother helped me.

**Kheladze:** So you've always had so much inner freedom that you've done whatever you wanted.

**Shengelaia:** Sure, but with the help of my mother.

**Kheladze:** Maybe the kind of family you've been in has had a huge impact on you. At the same time, you were an extraordinary child of that generation, and did other people in your generation have the same inner freedom?

**Shengelaia:** You know, I was very irritated by the fact that I was a child of a star. Imagine, I am a 12-13 year old boy, they approached my mother, surrounded her and told her what a nice boy I was and so on; then I told my mother: "You will walk and I'll be either ten steps forward or ten steps back." I was really irritated. Besides, it was war time, I was shaven bare and my ears were like wing mirrors; I knew I was an ugly one (laugh aloud) and meanwhile, they were telling me how nice and handsome I was.

**Kheladze:** Do you know what the greatest happiness is?

**Shengelaia:** Museum of Gurjaani was created during the Soviet Union, have you been there? This is an extraordinary museum, extraordinary. My brother George tried hard, Tengiz and I helped. The entire movie industry was present at the opening. Eldar

Ryazanov came and did interviews. He recorded Veriko Anjaparidze, recorded Ramaz Chkhikvadze, me, George and Tengiz. If you have the chance, watch it.

**Kheladze:** After World War II, given the rise in income, did your expectations for life change?

**Shengelaia:** After World War II? For a long time, up to another three years times were hard. For example, I tell you that there was a Universal store at Leonidze Street, formerly Kirov. People called it "USUNTORG" ("Smelling shopping"). There were good snacks/food, but no one would buy them, prices were so high and so, people would call them "USUNTORG," and they would just come, smell and go (smiles).

**Kheladze:** How long did it last?

**Shengelaia:** But then Stalin began to provide a discount. It discounted every year in March and went back to normal. You know, for example, as a kid I used to eat ice cream before the war and not during the whole war. It was strange a child couldn't eat even a single ice cream. The situation has changed.

**Kheladze:** How long did it take for people to get through those economic problems and poverty and start breathing freely. How do you remember it?

**Shengelaia:** Notwithstanding the purges and constant threat, life seemed easy and cheap. I was living in Moscow, there was a grocery store nearby, I used to buy black, red caviar, sausages, it was very cheap. From Khrushchev's times, it got more and more expensive. When we had our first daughter Nato, Ariadna had extra milk and it was a real help for me then, as we were filming "Winter's Tale". A woman used to come, took milk and paid Ara 5 rubles.

**Kheladze:** Was there anything in your youth, when you were 20 for example, when you thought that something was impossible, but it wouldn't have been so?

**Shengelaia:** No, never. We thought we would do it all. Of course, we couldn't, but we thought so.

**Kheladze:** What were your wishes for your country?

**Shengelaia:** It's not easy to say. It's different on a different stage. We need to find balance. I would love to.

**Kheladze:** Considering the country's interests, you are mostly concerned about territorial integrity today.

**Shengelaia:** Am I the only one?

You know, when we were filming "White Caravan", this "White Caravan" was called "Roads and Crossroads", Tamaz and I went to Ossetia<sup>7</sup> by train. There, in Tskhinvali, was the house of Merab's grandfather. There was nothing special, Ossetians were speaking

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<sup>7</sup> Georgian territory which is now occupied by Russians.

in the Georgian language, we had a very good relationship. The film script was practically written there. We were shooting for three years, because returning of the sheep needed one day; when we finished the shooting, it was screened. Many unknown but talented young people were invited, Rezo Cheishvili, Nodar Dumbadze. Everyone liked it. Nodar Dumbadze (a very famous Georgian writer) stood up and said, I liked it very much, but please call it "White Caravan" – he was the godfather of our film.

**Kheladze:** Why did he give you this advice?

**Shengelaia:** Because "Roads and Crossroads" didn't really work, "White Caravan" is something very beautiful.

**Kheladze:** Do you think that the new generation of our society considers territorial integrity as our main national problem?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, they do, but.

**Kheladze:** What do you expect from the development of European society?

**Shengelaia:** You know what, of course, this path is right, this path is right because Europe is the centre of civilisation and our striving towards it, is right. But I have to say that some balance has to be found.

**Kheladze:** What do you think what will be the future after borders have lost their meaning, and much has become common and many inaccessible things became accessible, will it change attitudes?

**Shengelaia:** I'll tell you about that. I am very sorry that almost a million Georgians do not live in Georgia. This is a very big loss. I do not know how, but some means should be created for Georgians to return to Georgia. This is our biggest loss.

Well, I tell you I was in Barcelona, and a Buba Kikabidze (Famous Georgian artists and singer) concert was held there. There were many Georgians. Plenty. And they all cried as they were watching. Won't you feel pity for them?

**Kheladze:** What is the role of religion in your life?

**Shengelaia:** Religion is the basis of my life. My pastor is Father Giorgi Zviadadze, we met in Kashveti church. Now he is in Sioni. Neli and I always go there.

**Kheladze:** Have you ever had an enemy? Or have you ever been considered as an enemy?

**Shengelaia:** You know God teaches us to love our enemies. Enemy is just an expression. We need to forgive each other.

**Kheladze:** Have you ever had the feeling that you couldn't trust somebody?

**Shengelaia:** Of course, there have been some cases, but it's hard for me to recall specific ones.

**Kheladze:** During the Soviet republic?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, during the USSR.

**Kheladze:** Since this interview is intended for an international audience, I would love to ask you briefly about your films. For your art, you choose an allegory, so through the “Blue Mountains,” you demonstrated how the country was ruled; “Unordinary Exhibition” was the fight against the system, in my opinion. What were your intentions?

**Shengelaia:** We all live in reality; my films just describe reality. Reality provides the scenario, characters, movie itself. There was a completely different reality in the 16th century, but today is different. So, we, me and my friends were describing real life.

**Kheladze:** Do you think Europe can create new conflicts on the continent?

**Shengelaia:** No, I don't think so.

**Kheladze:** Why?

**Shengelaia:** Maybe because of democracy. All countries respect each other. Yes, there are some issues with Britain, but still.

**Kheladze:** What do you think, does Europe as a union have an obligation to the people once colonised by them?

**Shengelaia:** Yes, for sure.

**Kheladze:** Do you think that Europe has learned its lesson? In terms of colonisation.

**Shengelaia:** I'm sure.

**Kheladze:** When did you feel pride or shame regarding Europe?

**Shengelaia:** I don't remember anything about being ashamed, but I felt proud when we saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. By the way, Eduard Shevardnadze (Eduard Shevardnadze, second president of Georgia, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party) played a big role then.

**Kheladze:** What did the demolition of the Berlin Wall mean to your generation?

**Shengelaia:** This meant that the wave of freedom hit the Soviet Union!

**Kheladze:** In a few months, the new year is coming, what do you think 2020 will be like, and what are your expectations?

**Shengelaia:** I wish the year 2020 to be full of peace and love!

**Kheladze:** And what are your expectations?

**Shengelaia:** Peace and love!