

9. Moses Gordieff

June 9, 2004

[This interview took place at the Unalaska Senior Center Common Room where Moses was helping to prepare lunch. Various background noises are coming from the kitchen. The interview was short because he needed to get back to work. Moses took part in Camp Qungaayux, the summer Unangan skills camp, where he made a bent wood visor. He had serious heart problems for many years and passed away in Anchorage on September 24, 2004.]

Ray Hudson: yeah, okay. I think, ah, ah, this is an interview with Moses Gordieff at Unalaska on June 9th —

Moses Gordieff: Yeah. Yeah.

RH: 2004. Ah, Moe, how old were you when you came back from the war, from World War II, from the evacuation?

MG: I was six.

RH: You were six. Okay. Were you born here at Unalaska?

MG: I was born and raised here. Ah, September 3, 1939. Down in the old hospital down there.

RH: Oh, yeah.

MG: I was born there.

RH: Oh, wow. [pause] Your grandfather [was] Elia Makarin?

MG: After my adoption, yeah.

RH: Oh, okay.

MG: My real mom and dad was Molly and Peter Lukanin. And she couldn't take care of me after she ended up in the TB hospital, her and my dad down in Southeast during the war.

RH: Oh, okay. Right.

MG: Agrifina Makarin was going to be the one she appointed to adopt me and she couldn't sign her name so Myria adopted me.

RH: Oh, all right. All right.

MG: I was adopted in Wrangle, August 5, 1942. So growing up I knew Martha as my real sister, her and Margaret—Margaret Makarin—

RH: Yeah.

MG: I was raised with them. And I never met my real mom and dad 'til I was thirteen.

RH: Oh, wow.

MG: After they got out of the hospital. I found out that they both had one lung from that TB they had.

RH: Yeah.

MG: Yeah, they both had one lung.

RH: I remember meeting Molly the first year or so I was here.

MG: Yeah?

RH: Yeah. Now Gordieff. . . . ah. . .

MG: Mom Myria was married to John Gordieff.

RH: John Gordieff.

MG: Yeah.

RH: Now, he was from Chernofski or?

MG: Ah? I don't know where he was from. But he lived in that house that used to be down by the creek, right by the church.

RH: Oh, okay, on the other side of—

MG: You know Victor Gordieff?

RH: Yes.

MG: That was his father. That's who he's married to.

RH: To Myria?

MG: Yeah.

RH: And how do you spell Gordieff? G-O-R-D-

MG: G-O-R-D-I-E-F-F

RH: Okay, good. Because I've seen it spelled differently.

MG: There's another Gordieff in Anchorage. He's a deacon, George Gordieff.

RH: Ah.

MG: So, he calls me brother, too, now 'cause my mom Myria raised him.

RH: Oh.

MG: I didn't know that, see. When she was married to George. So I found I've got a half-brother in Anchorage who's a deacon in the Orthodox church. It's great. He calls me up and sees me every time I go in for a check-up.

RH: Good, good. Now, when you came back here after the war, what was the first thing that happened here? Like the first day you came back?

MG: Gee, I barely remember it. But I know we stayed in a Quonset hut. Right up where that church is right now.

RH: Oh, right over here on the edge of the lake.

MG: Yeah, they had a gate down here by the old school, by the old power house there?

RH: Yeah.

MG: Marti said we used to have to get a pass to go to church. Military was still here then. In order to go out toward the dump to pick berries, we had to get a pass to go out there. And the mess hall we used to eat in, part of it is still there. See where that, ah, [he points out the window]

RH: Oh, yeah. Right on the corner there.

MG: See where the two, ah—

RH: Used to be two Quonset huts coming off of it?

MG: Yeah. That's where we used to eat. I remember going there. It was a little scary but fun! [Laughs]

RH: Probably if you were thirteen it would be a lot of fun.

MG: I was seven then.

RH: Oh, seven. Okay.

MG: It was kind of fun, but scary. We finally put our house where it is. Well, we used to stay in a little house. You know where Verne's first store used to be?

RH: Yeah.

MG: That little, ah, right across from Alice Tutiakoff's place?

RH: Ah, right. Yeah.

MG: Matfey had a little house there. Then that was vandalized so they moved us out of there. And where we're at now used to belong to old man Peter Samakensky. My grandpa Elia bought that, that lot from him, for twenty-five dollars.

RH: Wow.

MG: I've still got the deed to that. So that's my property now.

RH: Now Elia came from Biorka?

MG: Yeah.

RH: Yeah.

MG: And his wife was my godmother. She was born in Akutan.

RH: Oh, all right.

MG: So he met her over there when he worked at the whaling station. And they came here.

RH: And they moved here before the war, is that right?

MG: Yeah. They moved here. Well, they stayed at, well, we always stayed out at Biorka then.

RH: Oh, you did.

MG: Yeah.

RH: Oh, because that's where Molly, no, because that's where he was originally from.

MG: Yeah.

RH: Yeah. Now, his brother was Andrew Makarin—is that right?

MG: Yeah. His picture is right up there. [Indicates the bulletin board]

RH: I'll bring it down. [pause]

MG: Irene gave me a copy of it, too, so I've got one at home now. I'm going to get it enlarged.

RH: I can get it enlarged for you. Because actually, Shelly, my wife, made these copies.

MG: Oh, she did?

RH: So I can send it to you.

MG: Yeah, that will be great. I'd like two of them. I'll give one to Laresa for the boys.

RH: Actually, I gave her some.

MG: Oh, you did?

RH: I did.

MG: Oh, great, great.

RH: I didn't think of it, Moe, but I can send you some.

MG: I'd like a couple anyway.

RH: I'll be happy to. So, this is, on the far right—

MG: That's Elia and his wife, my godmother, Agrifina. Andrew Makarin, his brother. And Andrew's wife Eustina.

RH: Eustina.

MG: Yeah. She was blind. Somebody was sick or something wrong with 'em, they used to call her. I remember I had trouble with my stomach or something. They had her come down and she used her hands, rubbing all over me for a long time. I was all right afterwards.

RH: Wow. Wow.

MG: This was taken right in front of our house after church.

RH: Ah, okay. That's why they're all in suits and dressed up.

MG: Yeah. [Laughs]

RH: Now, Andrew was a reader in the church.

MG: Yes.

RH: Was Elia a reader?

MG: No. He'd help with candles and stuff. Or, he'd watch the outside door. Let people in and out. Help them on windy days or something. Used to have a doorman all the time in the church.

RH: After the war, did he go trapping at all?

MG: No. He worked in the Pribilofs for a while and then after a while he couldn't work no more.

RH: Okay.

MG: 'Cause in 1955, after we moved down there, no, we moved down there in '50 – '46, to the house we're in now, where I'm staying. Yeah. I remember all of us were living there. There were 7 or 8 of us living in that house then. Uncle Andrew helped us, our grandpa, well, his brother, to fix that place up. And when he got his place, the army put his cabanna in position, he stayed with us while they worked on his place.

RH: After he moved over from, ah, ah,

MG: Yeah, after the war. Makushin, Kashega, and Biorka, the government wouldn't let them move back. Ah, that was stupid.

RH: Yeah. Right, right.

MG: That's why, I think, was when part of our heritage started dropping, too.

RH: Yeah, because living in those smaller villages where you hunted all the time and fished and—

MG: Yeah Yeah. We all lived together for awhile while we were working on Uncle Andrew's house. I remember seeing all them people helping each other, you know, build their homes.

RH: Yeah, after the war.

MG: Almost all the Natives were all carpenters anyway.

RH: I know Andrew used to make models of baidarkas and stuff.

MG: Yeah, my dad did, too. Larry Shaishnikoff got one of his. I started trying to make one. [Laughs] I'm sorry I quit. But it was fun.

RH: That's a whole huge collection of skills.

MG: Yeah.

RH: To make something like that. Now, did you ever work up in the Pribilofs?

MG: Yeah. I was in school and Elia wasn't making so much and my mom Myria was working for the old school. That's where I went to school, the old school. When I was 15 I quit school to go to work up the Islands. Walter Dyakanoff and Charlie Hope told me, "Oh, tell them you're sixteen and you can go to work." So I went to work to help, you know, the family. Things were kinda going up in price, I think.

RH: And things were hard here after the war, I think.

MG: Yeah.

RH: There was an economic depression and—

MG: Yeah, everything was pretty hard. Yeah. I went to work when I was fifteen up the Islands. I worked there from 1955 to 1963. I went to work for a hundred-and-fifty bucks a month.

RH: Wow.

MG: It was a lot of money, boy! [Laughs] Great! I bought my first wood and coal stove for the house. Still got that stove, too.

RH: Where did you get coal from in those days?

MG: Oh, we used to go up the lake up here, the road straight up here, where the old sack pile used to be by the mouth of the creek up there. Well, on the right hand side as you go

inside that little lagoon, there used to be a pile of coal. We used to have to dig for it, though. We used to get maybe 50, 60 sacks of coal, military gunny sacks. They used to find a lot of them in the old buildings and stuff. We'd fill those up and bring them back, row them back down. There was Bill Zaharoff's boat we used, and two families and we'd go out and get coal and bring it down and share it half and half.

RH: You and the Zaharoffs?

MG: Yeah. We'd spend all day out there. Take dry fish out, smoked salmon, take the kettle, bread and everything, spend the whole day out.

RH: Neat.

MG: It was good. You know, working together. Now we got wood and have to go down there and cut it. We used to help pack wood home with a wheel-barrow or something before we could go out and play after school. Get all the chores done.

RH: How long would you have to let that wood season before you could use it?

MG: Well, it was always on the beach drying, you know. We chopped it up right away and stacked it. It was good. Wood and coal for the winter. During the summer you'd make about two or three trips up there to get coal. We had an old big coal bin outside grandpa built so we had enough coal for all winter. Wood was stacked up for all winter. It was great. In 1956, after I got my first oil stove, the wood stove we had, my uncle Peter Galaktionoff, he helped us convert it to oil.

RH: Oh, okay.

MG: So we had an oil stove. Well, in the back room we had a little wood stove yet. Well, it was good. After working at the Islands, in 1958 I joined the National Guard. I was seventeen. I took my basic training down in Fort Ord, California. I turned 18 down there. I spent six years in the National Guard.

RH: Wow.

MG: That was good, too. California, Fort Lewis, Washington. Every March we'd go into Anchorage for two weeks of basic training.

RH: So you'd be out here and then go into Anchorage?

MG: Yeah. For basic training. Our little group from here and group from St. Paul and St. George. Bethel. They were all over the state.

RH: Who else went from here?

MG: There was me and Kusta, Simeon Lekanoff, Greg Golodoff — Greg Golodoff!
[corrects himself] Greg—

RH: Shapsnikoff.

MG: Greg Shapsnikoff, my uncle. Neon, Nick Lekanoff, Coco, Larry Shaishnikoff.
Myself.

RH: Quite a few.

MG: Victor Gordieff. Yeah, there was a few. And our sergeant was May Dyakanoff's
husband, Harvey Reinkin. Well, he was a master sergeant. He's the one that started it
here. What the hell, ninety-eight bucks a month!

RH: Yeah! Yeah. That was good. How would you get in? Would you take the mailboat
in or fly in?

MG: No, we flew in. When the DC-3 was running. But to the Pribilofs we took the old
Penguin, government boat. I never liked staying there, you know. People from here,
Nikolski, Atka and Akutan. All crowded down in the cargo hold. It was just like slaves.
It was a 16 hour trip, but goddamn it was terrible because we had to eat down in the hold,
wash dishes down in the hold. One little bathroom down there. It smelled. Some of the
oldtimers, the younger guys, some of them would get seasick. You could smell that,
smell the oil from the engine room.

RH: Yeah.

MG: It was rough.

RH: What was your first job up there?

MG: [Laughs] Garbage detail! "The village truck" we called it. Yeah, damn.

RH: Nick Galaktionoff was saying his first job he worked on the road.

MG: Road gang? I been on that, too. Then from there I worked at, ah, the second year
they put me in the by-products. That's where they ground up all the seal carcasses.

RH: Oh, okay, for fertilizer?

MG: Yeah. Then the seal blubber that they got from the blubber shop they made seal oil
out of that in 50 galleon drums. Ship those all out. Everything went to St. Louis,
Missouri. From there I got transferred to the barrel shop where we barreled the skins, put
'em in barrels. Eight-five skins to a barrel.

RH: Wow.

MG: Sometimes they'd kill—the highest kill we had was 5,000. So we barrel 5,000.

The next day could be maybe 3 or 4,000. It was a lot of work. I worked there until '63.

RH: Now, when men worked up there did they ever send seal meat back here?

MG: Well, we got to bring some home with us.

RH: Okay.

MG: Yeah.