**Aziz:** I am very pleased to welcome Gadel Gumerov to our Oral Histories project. We are interested in the stories of people like you, as testimonies of time, of your perception. I think it will be very interesting for everyone, as hockey is one of the most popular sports. I myself am a big hockey fan and it is doubly pleasant and interesting to meet a person who is professionally engaged in hockey and our listeners will be very interested to know your impressions and opinions. How did you come to hockey?

**Gadel**: Thank you very much for inviting me to this wonderful programme. I was born in Tatarstan, in the town of Nizhny Kamsk. I was 3 years old and was given skates. And my first steps in hockey began not in indoor ice palaces, where there are warm locker rooms, warm rooms. We started training in harsh conditions. Our ears were freezing, but we still played. I practised better and better, and when I was 5 years old, we started recruiting for the team.

**Aziz:** At the age of three you started hockey?

**Gadel:** Yes, I was born in 1995 and I was training with those who were born in 93-94. And when the 1995 group was recruited, I was already well on my feet.

**Aziz:** You were already a veteran at the age of 5.

**Gadel:** Yes, more experienced than the other players. Our team consisted of 60 people. The coach had to keep 40 people and 10 people were cut from the team. In the end we had 25-30 people left. Our coach was very experienced and strong, we always took prizes and were one of the best teams in Russia. CSKA Moscow came to play with us. We were on equal terms with them. The Chelyabinsk team also played with us. We were good together, but then, as it always happens, our coach was offered to work in a more prestigious club Akbars, in the capital of Tatarstan, in Kazan, and he, of course, took this opportunity and still works there, and his team shows good results. I played in my team until I was 12 years old and my mum had the idea to transfer me to the SKA team in St. Petersburg. I went for a viewing and they took me there.

**Aziz:** it's a legendary team.

**Gadel:** yes, it's prestigious to play there. And there was an application to play in Canada. My mum paid for the tickets, I flew there with a group of players from Russia to try my hand and stay at the hockey school. The coaches really liked me and I was accepted. I played a little more in St. Petersburg and then went to Canada.

**Aziz:** how old were you?

**Gadel:** I went to Peter when I was 12 years old, and I went to Canada when I was 13. All my childhood I go to one city and then another, so I left easily. I don't miss home. I lived and played 3.5 years in Canada and I needed to move on to junior hockey.

**Aziz:** what city in Canada did all of this take place in?

**Gadel:** I lived in Montreal for 2.5 years.

**Aziz:** it's the hockey capital of the world

**Gadel:** Yeah, then I moved to Ottawa. To a more serious college. Then I got an offer to try out for the junior league and I went to the US with my agent. There I tried out for 3 teams and all three teams accepted me. So I had a choice which team to join. We chose the Washington State team, I played a season there, but there was a mishap. My agent overlooked the documents, when we were released for 10 days on holiday, I came back and it turned out that I overstayed and I was put Closed. My agent ended up seriously screwing me over. I didn't get a chance to come back. My age was already approaching the youth hockey league in Russia. I called home, in Nizhny Kamsk, as there is a youth league there, and I was immediately accepted. I arrived, immediately signed a contract, and we played a season of the youth league. We had a good serious squad. We started getting offers from the Major Hockey League. But our team had the Continental Hockey League. We signed a contract, started training camp and we were transferred to the High Hockey League and after that season I was left for another 2 years. Then I had a serious knee injury. And knocked out my teeth. And I thought it wasn't worth the sacrifice for the money. You've got to get out in time. And I was short. I got a job helping my mum in a cafe, then I started bartending there. I saw my director on the street, who came from Kazan, and we met by chance and got to talking. There was an offer from China, but nobody knew where to go. I flew to China and they arranged for me to join the Chinese Olympic team, which was just preparing for the 2022 Olympic Games. I arrived in Beijing.

**Aziz:** in what capacity did you work in the team?

**Gadel:** as a development coach. A separate position. It's technical aspects. How to skate properly, how to throw the puck properly, etc. I worked there from 2018 to 2020, everything was going well for the Olympics and the pandemic started. I had to get a visa, I left China with one backpack, thought, well the virus will pass quickly. I left for two weeks. All my stuff stayed in China. It was only two months ago that I got them back. Every single thing had the emblem of China, the Olympics on it. It's like a memory. I was never able to go back there. The Winter Sports Centre was closed, the athletes were taken to Mongolia and all foreign coaches were asked to leave the country.

**Aziz:** What was your impression of Canadian hockey? And what position did you play there?

**Gadel:** I played centre forward.

**Aziz:** centre forward? That's great.

**Gadel:** I'll tell you about Canada. It's a hotel hockey world. There are hockey gates in every house there. They put everyone in hockey from the time they're kids. Maybe later he will study, maybe he will be a policeman, maybe he will be a waiter, but he must be able to play hockey.

**Aziz:** Is it a very sporty nation?

**Gadel:** yes. And the girls do hockey. Everybody knows how to stand on skates. Everything is connected to the ice. The parents themselves also skate on the ice with their kids all the time. Like volunteers. They devote a lot of time to it. They get very cold in the winter. I helped our college to fill the ice rinks. It's a very interesting place to live because you start to learn everything about hockey. Everywhere you look, it's all about hockey. The adverts are about hockey.

**Aziz:** Montreal is the hockey capital of the world.

**Gadel:** I have good memories with Montreal, I went to an NHL game there. I went to a Montreal-Boston game. They're rivals of each other. It was a tough power play. There were no empty seats. And the stadium seats 20,000 people. The atmosphere was so intense, the whole crowd was on their feet.

**Aziz:** I can imagine that.

**Gadel:** it was a very good experience for me. It is motivating to work every day. It's a very nice atmosphere.

**Aziz:** this is how hockey stars are made. When there is such attention, nurturing.

**Gadel:** yes, they are professionals from childhood. A lot of attention to their diet, how they behave in the locker room, how they socialise, how they think. Whole hockey institutes there. But I won't say that Soviet hockey was worse.

**Aziz:** of course it was. I want to tell you that I am a long-time hockey fan. I want to name my stars who have become my idols for me. And then you can name yours, if you have any. Out of the defencemen Larry Robinson, Bobby Oher and 3 forwards, they are Guy Efler, Mario Lemierre and Gretzky.

These are the five Canadian hockey players for all time. I saw them play on TV and it made a lasting impression on me. Do you have any idols?

**Gadel:** all the same. They're Canadian classics.

**Aziz:** are they remembered in Canada?

**Gadel:** yeah sure. There's a hockey glory museum there, in Toronto. I've been there. And there's a lot to see and read there. To see how the sticks looked like, the equipment of the goalie, who at that time went out without a mask, only in a bib. Hockey players would leave the game with scars. It was very tough hockey at that time. There were fights, too. The rules used to be unregulated. And people like to watch it, so the rules didn't change.

**Aziz:** it's a man's sport.

**Gadel:** these athletes are remembered there and will be remembered for a long time.

**Aziz:** as for Soviet hockey. I grew up on that hockey. The best five I saw in my life was the Dynamo team. Valery Vasiliev, Vasily Pereukhin, 2 Golikov brothers and Alexander Maltsev. As for the national team, the best trio is Yakushev, Maltsev and Kharlamov and that's on the level of those Canadians. From your point of view, why now Russian hockey, with the abundance of talented players, does not reach the level it had in the Soviet Union? It was an advanced hockey power.

**Gadel:** We have a strong national team. The KHL league is inferior to the NHL. All the stars are leaving. There's a shortage of good players in the KHL and they start recruiting second-rate players and that's why the league is getting weaker. Now they are starting to retain good players like they used to. We have a rising star Michkov now. We have high hopes for him. The league is starting to look more interesting. We have to reach the level, although it will be very difficult. Because we have already lost something in the 90s.

**Aziz:** some continuity with those great hockey traditions?

**Gadel:** The hockey system in the U.S. and in Canada is evolving. Something new is being done, trying new things.

We had a very good school. Finland and Sweden stole that school. They looked at it, recorded it and said that's our school. Something can be modified, but the originators were other people. It was strange that they were winning so fast. We had really really good techniques. It used to be simple books.

**Aziz:** in my non-professional opinion, one of the reasons is, I've been watching hockey since I was a kid, the USSR national team was different from the Canadian national team in terms of style. You could see right away that they were different teams, different styles. Now Russian teams are very similar in style to Canadian teams. Mostly Russian players go to Canada, not the other way round. It's hard to surpass the Canadians in their own Canadian style of play. We need to offer something different. The Soviet Union offered its own model.

**Gadel:** We had combination hockey. The Canadians have more power hockey. If the Canadians play on the old court, it's a bit hard for them, but our team wins. Now there are few combinations, the style of hockey is energy-consuming, but it's very effective. It's not like in football, where you can stand, but there is constant work and it looks very effective. The spectators like it.

**Aziz:** yes it's spectacular, it's a huge business. A lot of things are being done for it. It's a wonderful great sport. One of the most exciting, dynamic sports. It's a tough sport. It requires tremendous physical exertion.

**Gadel:** We go through training camp every year. It's a serious period for every hockey player. Every hockey player approaches it with fear. There are cross-country races, loads and running in the heat.

**Aziz:** do you have to pass standards?

**Gadel:** there is a certain base before the season so that you can play at a high level of endurance all season long. If you come without this base, you may not be able to endure at some point. If you compare it to the CIS, in America everyone prepares for the season on their own.

**Aziz:** it's a special mentality. Reliance on yourself. Since childhood, everyone is engaged in training. But here we are used to the fact that we need a coach.

**Gadel:** like I said, they've been in hockey since they were kids. In Canada, the competition is fierce. So many teams, so many different leagues. Just because you play at a good level as a kid and score goals doesn't mean you're going to play hockey. In Rossi, they bring in a coach, and the coach has to coach them. And they can't do it without a coach. The older generation of the KHL has started to look towards Canada and are also starting to prepare themselves. They come to training camps already fit and start to prepare professionally. The system itself has not got to the point where you can trust everyone and there is no mad competition. We had 40 people for one place. In Canada, a coach will pass over a player, while our coach will take on an athlete to get him in shape for the season. That's the difference.

**Aziz:** what you said, it's all very character-building. You're in this environment of constant competition at such a young age, both in training and in the game. And it's all character building and the weak are not held back.

**Gadel:** The first thing they see in a player is their character and their stress tolerance. If you're competitive, you'll make something out of you. If you're weak-willed, they're pushed back immediately. In competition, you grow.

**Aziz:** and it gets tougher and tougher? Are there any strong ones left?

**Gadel:** There are a lot of schools, but there are only 30 teams in the KHL. And there are 30 people per team. And there are also foreigners coming in. The competition is getting tougher and tougher every year.

**Aziz:** How did you end up here in Uzbekistan?

**Gadel:** when we had the pandemic situation, I called that man, his name is Vladimir Ivanovich Storonkin, and I told him that I was in the clip and asked him where he was.

He said he was in sunny Tashkent. They had a WHL team. They were playing very well. This team was drafted from scratch. They went through 2 Rounds and made the playoffs.

**Aziz:** Team Humo? I have seen that team.

**Gadel:** because of the pandemic, the season stopped. And after six months, he called me and asked me to join. No adult team yet, but the main thing is to get in the groove. I flew in and we started working with the kids. It was 2020. The school was peculiar. Here it is not selection, when you have to select, but here it is recruitment. So that more people would get interested and start bringing their children. Due to the fact that these are different-aged children, they can not be combined into one team. We had to combine two ages. More or less we gathered a few teams to train together. Then we started to connect teams by strength. The beginning was interesting and hard.

**Aziz:** it's interesting to start from scratch.

**Gadel**: it wasn't completely from scratch, there were already players there. It wasn't completely assembled.

**Aziz:** we had a team called Binokor, we lost the traditions. This team played in the 1st league of the Soviet Union.

**Gadel:** the general secretary of the Uzbekistan Hockey Federation, Shukurullo Karimov, played in this team.

**Aziz:** he understands, he understands.

**Gadel**: it is good that he works in our federation. He communicates with us, prompts us, we often talk.

**Aziz:** we didn't have an ice palace for a long time. And now we have an ice palace built, and I find out that we have a hockey team there. At first I was very sceptical about it. What kind of hockey team could there be if there was nothing. I went and watched a few matches of the Humo team and I was amazed at the level and how professional and entertaining it all was. How was it possible to build such a professional team so quickly?

**Gadel:** It's the work of the whole management and sponsors. It's a great job of the coaches.

**Aziz:** and the leadership of the country?

**Gadel:** yes and the leadership federation. It's a huge work of the marketing department. Well, and the fans. All in all, this is a good project.

**Aziz**: the pandemic disrupted everything. I saw women and children coming there, the hall was full.

**Gadel:** I guess it had to be like that, if it wasn't for the pandemic I would still be working in China.

**Aziz:** do you coach the whole team now?

**Gadel:** I am the coach of the Uzbekistan Hockey Federation and the Humo team. It's not playing in the top hockey league now, it's playing for Kazakhstan. We were the 12th team to enter the championship. And in such a short period of time, the coaching staff, management, marketing, sponsors created a team that reached the finals. The team of Kazakhstan is a team of a new sample, they have been playing with each other for a long time and we had a good game with them, but they turned out to be stronger.

**Aziz:** how old are you?

**Gadel:** I am 27 years old

**Aziz:** so you became a coach at the age of 25?

**Gadel:** I had my first experience when I was 25.

**Aziz:** How did you make the transition from player to coach?

**Gadel**: When I lived in Canada and in the USA, I learnt from other coaches, took notes. Coaches would call players to have us help them at hockey camps. I have notes on how to do the training, videos and when I was put as a coach, at first I was nervous, but then I quickly got into the rhythm. And when I came here and started working with kids, it's a different specificity. And when I was invited to the main team, it's a different job. Adults are also like children.

**Aziz:** players are always like children for a coach.

**Gadel:** Well, there are other problems here. You also have to adjust to the mood. How a player acts, what he needs.

**Aziz:** you are very good. It's rare that outstanding players become good coaches. It's a completely different profession. Just because you are a great player doesn't mean you are a good coach.

**Gadel:** you have to understand the psychology, the person inside. You see hockey in a different way.

**Aziz:** Well, it's an outstanding profession to be a coach. Educating a huge number of people.

**Gadel:** you have to interest the player to play well. Find an approach to each player.

**Aziz:** Uzbekistan is a southern country. And hockey. Pele was asked, When will the Russian team become world champion in football? He said, When will Brazil become world hockey champion? Do we have a chance in Uzbekistan? Are the local youth interested?

**Gadel:** We have a U18 national team with players aged 17-18. The head coach there is Fakhrutinov Artur. They went to Kazan for the Asian and Oceanian Championships. And they became champions.

**Aziz:** Amazing.

**Gadel**: The President of Uzbekistan congratulated them. Noted. Our player, Rustamkhonov Jasur became a scorer, scored the most. We need to work more, not to put sticks in the wheels.

**Aziz:** I, for example, am a hockey fan and would be very happy if this sport is developed in Uzbekistan. And not only me, but also a huge number of people. The audience would be no less than that of football.

**Gadel:** a lot of people go to hockey. And the stadium fills up. We have a very spectacular sport, fights, goals, beautiful combinations. We took Rustamkhonov into the team. We already have 2 Uzbek players, Rasulov, Kogan. Our coach deals with goalkeepers. Our goalkeeper is 16 years old and is already learning. If he tries hard, something will come out of him.

**Aziz:** you have told a lot of interesting things and gave hope that Uzbekistan will become one of the countries where hockey will be developed. This will only benefit both the youth and the country. Good luck to you in your work and we will hope for your professional success.