

"Look at them under the microscope," urges Medvedev.

My god, I never thought that stones could have such a spell-binding power - I can't tear myself away from the eyepiece. And still the enigmatic light that the hand of the master jeweller extracts from the diamond could not distract me from the thought: "How welcome they are in our current state of poverty." And the stones shone to my enraptured glance - honey and cinnamon-coloured stones, yellow ones, transparent ones; greenish, violet and pink ones...

"And where are the lilac-coloured diamonds?" I ask, even though I'm actually seeing all of the others for the first time.

"They've been sent for expert examination to Lvov where our best diamond specialist lives."

The camp store, which I visited next, was desolately empty. Cans of fish - which are still being fed to the animals - fermented fruit juice in 3-liter jars, eggplant paste, bread - that's all. How people survive is anyone's guess. And this a few hundred metres from fabulously precious stones.

Ahead lay the road back. What would I hear upon my return to Archangel? We had directed appeals high and low, but silence, not a word from the government.

About the magical properties of the diamond it was written long ago: "It must be obtained freely, without compulsion or coercion. Then it has the greatest power."

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