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# 42 DAYS OF THE PURPLE DIAMOND REIGN

October 7, 2015 Alan Bronstein

**BY ALAN BRONSTEIN**

While the story of the 1.09 carat **Purple Heart** begins with my trip to Antwerp in 1997, some backstory will help set the stage for it's discovery.

***ORIGINS? WE'RE NOT QUITE SURE...***

In early 1996 De Beers was marketing up to 80% of the worlds natural diamonds from various countries and mines around the world, including Australia, Russia and most African countries. In the

face of De Beers' formidable near-monopoly of worldwide diamond sources, there appeared to be no reliable means by which to identify countries of origin because of mixed production. In response to the dilution of their identities and profits, emerging & leading national diamond producing consortiums in Canada, Russia and Australia began considering some serious changes in the way that business was done. A sea change was about to occur.

### ***ARGYLE DECLARES ITSELF FREE (OF DE BEERS)***

In mid 1996, Australia's famed Argyle Diamond Mine decided to lead the pack and sell and market their own diamonds by creating a branding initiative for themselves. Shortly thereafter, Russia and Canada would follow suit and thus DeBeers was now marketing less than 50% of global diamond resources.



***Argyle Diamond Mine***

The Argyle Mine in Australia had garnered a reputation over the previous decade for producing some of the most beautiful deep pink diamonds ever discovered. These super rare diamonds had identifiable characteristics, which were distinctive to the mine. While their supply has dwindled considerably, to this day we still see the Argyle source producing a very limited number of these saturated pink to purplish-red colors. While they are beautiful, rare and prized natural specimens, they tend to be small (95% are below 1 carat in size) and often exhibit inclusions that would be less acceptable in a colorless stone.

### ***MARIANNE SHARES A SURPRISE IN ANTWERP***

In early 1997, I went hunting for colored diamonds in Antwerp. Along with Mumbai, Tel Aviv and New York – my home town - Antwerp remains one of the 4 main international diamond cutting and buying centers.



With the distinction of not only being an Argyle client but also a spokesperson helping them launch their brave branding initiative, my first stop was naturally to the Argyle office in Antwerp.

Marianne Georges, the manager of Argyle's Antwerp operations greeted me with a big smile as I entered the office. We had become good friends during Argyle's formative branding days and together we shared a mutual admiration for beautiful colored diamonds.

"I have a surprise for you," she exclaimed before I could even say hello.

Who doesn't love a surprise? Marianne had a captive audience of one and knew all too well that I was a sucker for rare colors and that Argyle was responsible for some great collector's items that I routinely and doggedly sought out.

I will never forget the smirk on her coy face. I could tell that she was about to share something she considered special. Very special.

She handed me a parcel paper. In pencil on the paper were the words "round" and "0.50" referring to the shape and weight respectively.

I opened up the parcel and my eyes widened.

It wasn't just a purplish diamond – I was face to face with the most purple diamond I had ever seen.



*Marianne Georges & Alan Bronstein in Antwerp 1997*

The dance began.

“Marianne - is this from your mine?”

She ignores me. *What's going on here* – she *definitely* heard me. For years, I catalogued the range of colors (mostly Brownish-Pink, Purplish-Pink , even Purple-Pink) one could find in the Argyle production assortments but never before had I witnessed this color. I popped the question. “How much is it?”

**“Alan, it's not for sale.”**

*“It wasn't just a purplish diamond – I was face to face with the most purple diamond I had ever seen.”*

— Alan Bronstein

“What?” I exclaimed in a voice markedly louder than I intended. “Why not?” Marianne leaned in closer. “Look, if we have never seen this color, how could we know what to charge? I hope you understand.” Those first few seconds I couldn't understand - I was still flummoxed by her refusal to sell me the stone. I quickly regained my composure and returned to the previously ignored question.

“Please tell me – did this come from Argyle?”

“No.” Finally, I was getting somewhere.

“So, do you know where it's from?” I tilted my head as if to receive the gospel word. “C'mon – I have to know.”

“Russia.”

What an afternoon...this was the first time I heard Russia referenced as a colored diamond source and this was the first time I had ever seen a diamond this color. Two firsts in one fell swoop. I had no

reason to doubt Marianne considering our longstanding relationship; *after all*, I thought - *I'll just take her on her word and not torture myself*. She said it plain and clear; It's not for sale. But still...

Rising to head to my next appointment, I gathered my loupe and tweezers. "Thank you for showing me this amazing stone." Our parting hug began with me doing my best to hide my disappointment but in a matter of seconds, my disappointment gave way to gratitude to Marianne for sharing something with me that few had ever known or seen before.

***DÉJÀ VU - AND NOW THERE ARE TWO.***

My next appointment was nearby with a well-respected large-scale Indian diamond manufacturer known as a specialty cutter of colored diamonds.

Greetings over tea led to my being handed a large padded leather box with gold lock hinges.



***Argyle rough diamonds***

“Here” my host said as he sat down beside me carefully opening the leather box. Inside were 50 small plastic boxes - 10 rows of 5 to my count - each containing a beautiful colored diamond in its own right.

There it was nestled amongst the other treasures, calling me. In a sea of standout pinks, blues, oranges and greens, I noticed a .75 carat purple diamond similar to one I had just seen in Marianne's office.

I pulled 5 stones from the box – leaving the purple for last - and asked the gentleman for a price.

“Lot only,” he said. “No selection.”

Buying a multi-million dollar lot was not on my agenda that day so I gently put back the stones and engaged the owner in some unrelated banter as I sealed the leather box.

“Tell me, about the .75 carat purple - do you know where the rough is from?” Perhaps the owner might know something more than Marianne, I thought.

“I cut it myself – it is from Russia. Beautiful, right?”

Twice in one day I had seen a color I had never experienced before from a geological source not known for producing this material. Was everyone drinking the same Kool-aid or was I living out a “Twilight Zone” TV episode in Antwerp?

Whatever it was, damn - I was excited. The icing on the cake was that I'd be in Antwerp for the whole week and sensed that if this was my fate the first day, the remaining 6 days would yield untold amazing new discoveries.

Brimming with hope, off I went to every office, to every collector, to every manufacturer on a not-so-covert mission to find my own purple Russian dream of a diamond and lo and behold - nada. Not a single stone, not a credible lead - *not even a mere mention* of purple diamonds from Russia. By the time I boarded my flight for New York, I recall thinking that the purple diamond gods had teased me first only to abandon me.

### ***I'M IN A NEW YORK STATE OF FIND***



My first jet-lagged day back in New York while standing around the Diamond Dealers Club, I feel a hand pat my back causing me to spill a little coffee.

“Watch it,” I yell, “this isn’t a bus station” as I turn around to see who is touching me.

Still wearing his cutters blue smock, he had just come from his factory and held out his dirty hand to pass me a filthy worn stone parcel covered in *shmootz* and crossed out penciled numbers.

“Hey, Alan – sorry about that – but tell me, is this for you? It’s just off my cutting wheel.”

*“I opened the grimy parcel and a taser-like shock wave of emotions flooded my skull...”*



— Alan Bronstein

I opened the grimy parcel and a taser-like shock wave of emotions flooded my skull as a magnificent, bright and saturated 1 carat heart-shaped purple diamond – the same color and larger than the two seen in Antwerp – jumped into my line of vision. "From Russia, right?" The cutter squinted. "Yeah - how did you know?" Later that day I'd learn that the cutter had bought 10 rough pieces and that this was the best of the lot. The diamond gods had redeemed me.



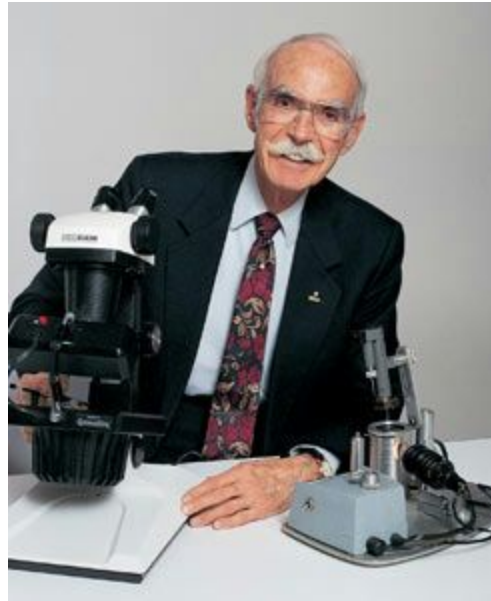
*The Purple Heart finally emerges.*

Needless to say, it was a brief negotiation contingent that the GIA certify the gem as having “natural” color. Which, of course - it did. Notwithstanding my proud new ownership, my curiosity regarding the Russian connection remained unsatisfied. How had a production source not known for such distinctive material suddenly given birth to purple diamonds the likes never seen on two different continents within the span of 9 days? I needed answers and I knew just who to ask.

### ***FROM RUSSIA WITH CROWNINGSHIELD***

My first stop was a consultation with the late esteemed **Robert Crowningshield** - head of research at the Gemological Institute of America. As early as 1956, Robert discovered the spectroscopic feature for detecting yellow irradiated diamonds. In the world of colored diamond research, Crowningshield was without peer.

Here was a gemological icon unaffected by rumor or commercial gain; someone who could provide both geological and market insight into the new purple-diamonds-from-Russia phenomenon.



*Robert Crowningshield (1919-2006)*

In our meeting, Robert confirmed that a small number of various sized purple hue diamonds had recently surfaced originating from Russia. It seemed that after Russia severed distribution with De Beers they were selling their own rough and had accumulated a very small number of small sizes (most below 1 carat) of this unique purple rough.

Once the Russians sold their purple rough into the cutting market, there was a six week window during which a few stones appeared. And then they disappeared - like they were never there.

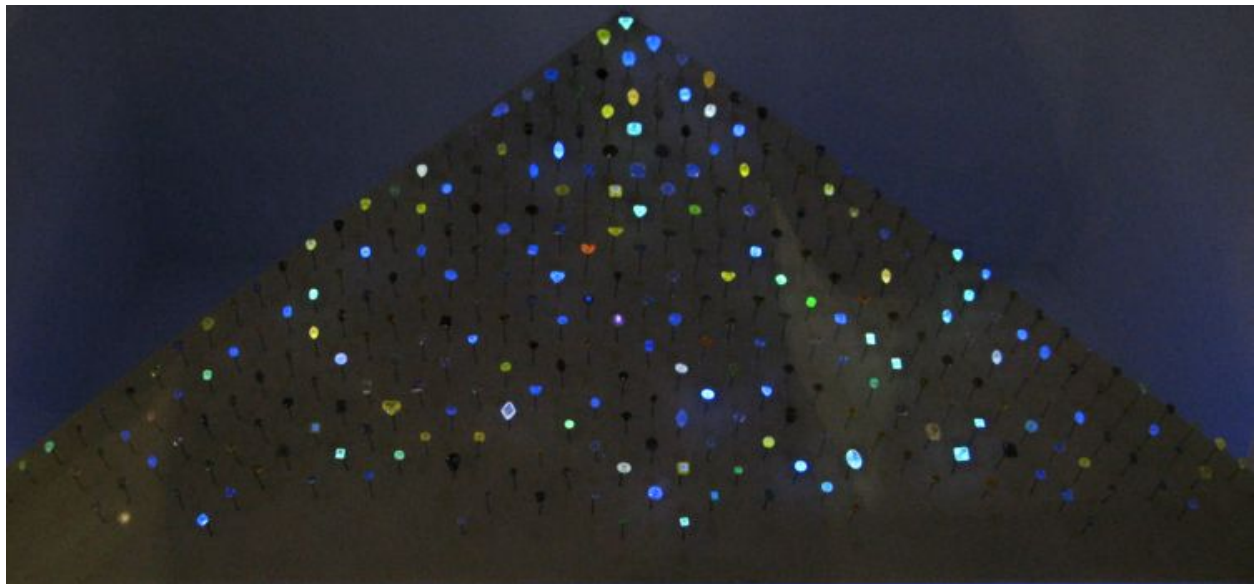
From time to time nowadays I come across a pretty purple colored diamond here and there. Most however are small and imperfect. More recently it has been noted that a small number of purple diamonds have been found in Canada.

The evolving story of the growing awareness of natural colored diamonds is filled with discovery and ongoing revelation. As for my discovery of purple diamonds however, there would never be another

42 days like the 6 weeks in 1997 when after multiple sighting and repeated foiled attempts, fate had finally given me the gift of finding the finest of the lot.

That is how I found the Purple Heart - my first and most exciting purple diamond.

The Purple Heart is now part of the **Aurora Pyramid of Hope** collection currently on display at London's Natural History Museum.



*The Pyramid of Hope under ultra violet lights*

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#### **Photo Credits:**

*\*\*\*\*Argyle Diamond Mine photo courtesy of Rio Tinto*

*\*\*\*\*Antwerp's diamond bourse photo courtesy of AFP*

*\*\*\*\*M Georges & A Bronstein photo courtesy of Alan Bronstein*

*\*\*\*\*Argyle rough diamonds photo courtesy Rio Tinto*

*\*\*\*\*NYDDC photo courtesy of Diamond Dealers Club of New York*

*\*\*\*\*G. Robert Crowningshield photo courtesy of modenjeweler.com*

*\*\*\*\*The Purple Heart photo courtesy of Tino Hammid*



**Alan Bronstein** has spent his entire career of 36 years as a color diamond trader. He has advised on some of the most historic stones and transactions and curated the 2 most famous diamond collections existing in museums of the world. The Aurora Pyramid of Hope on exhibit at London's Natural History Museum and The Aurora Butterfly of Peace at the National Museum Smithsonian Institution.

Alan is the owner of Aurora Gem, a leading specialist in colored diamonds.