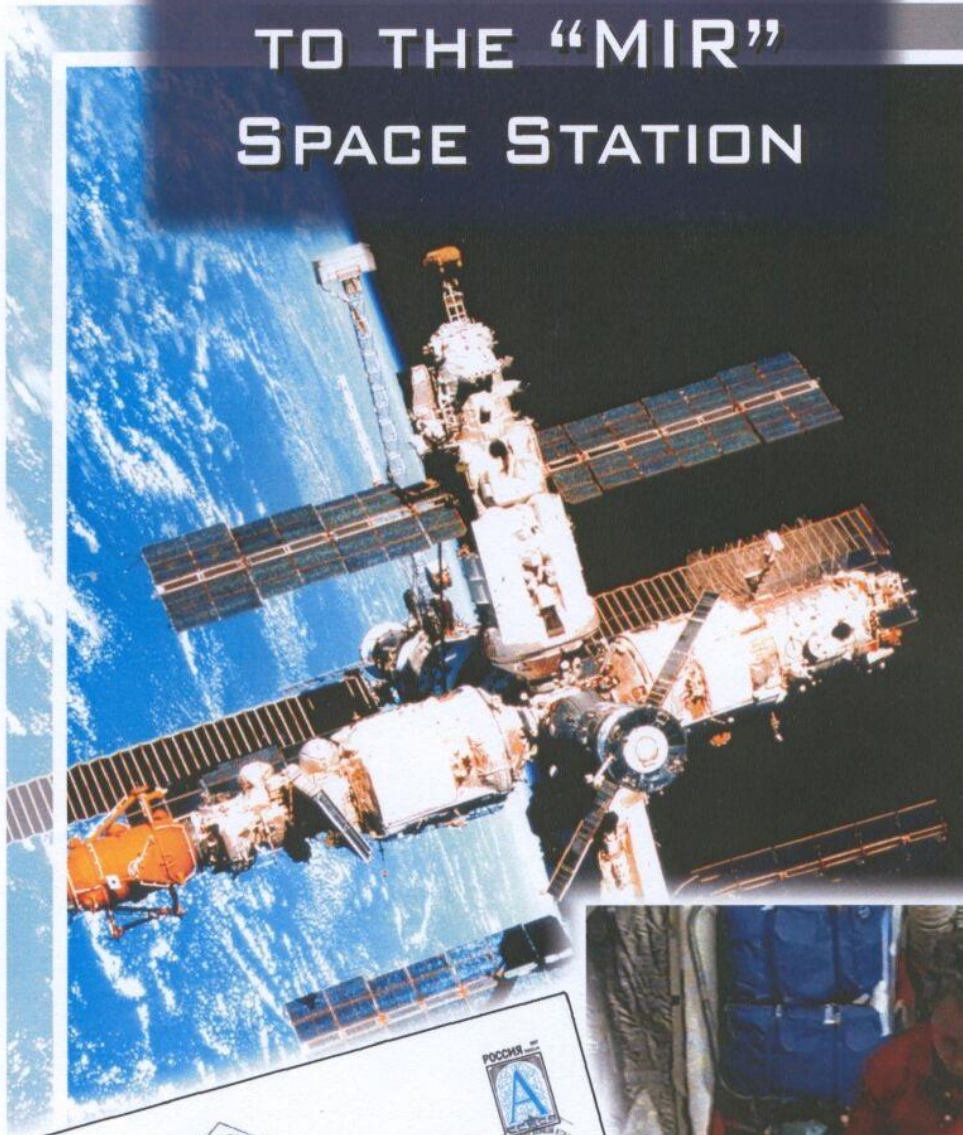


THE LAST MAIL TO THE "MIR" SPACE STATION



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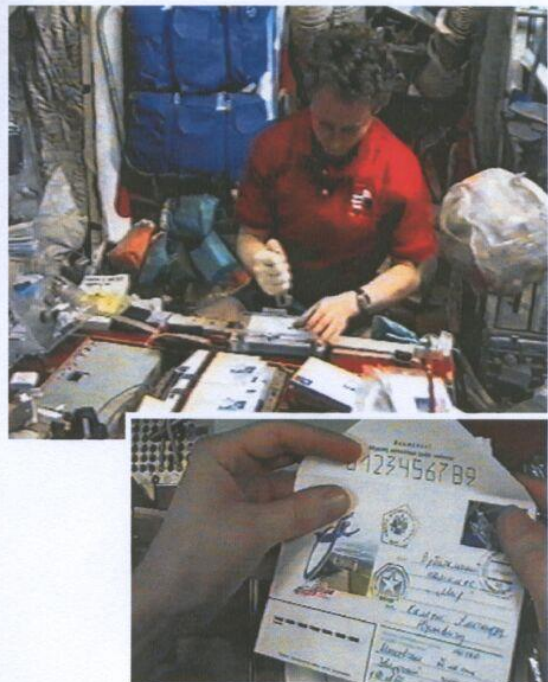
In the spring of last year, 2001, the media bombarded us with shocking news about the imminent "falling to Earth" of the Russian space station MIR. Among the many television images offered, the philatelists paid particular attention to a curious sequence in which the commander of the MIR, Sergei Viktorovich Zaletin, delicately postmarked letters that had recently arrived from Earth. Fortunately for many collectors and more so, of course, for astrophilatelists, AFINSA has managed to obtain the exclusive not only for this rare piece of film but also for the extraordinary postal material that the cosmonaut Zaletin was postmarking.

That peculiar postal activity reminds me that when the Post Office functionaries cancel the stamps on letters and parcels, these letters and parcels sit quietly in the basket or on the desk where they have been left. The same thing happens, for more obvious reasons, with the heavy bronze postmarking stamp, that doesn't move an inch from its normal resting-place on an Indian ink pad. Naturally all of this happens on earth, but what happens when one lives and works "up there" in weightlessness? What happens when nothing weighs anything, not even the postman himself? Well, then we have a paradox and our minds become blocked when faced by such a situation.

The last crewmembers of the MIR, cosmonauts Sergei Zaletin and Alexander Kaleri, flew on 31 March 2001 to the MIR. The cinema actor Vladimir Stekolov should have accompanied them to film an Anglo-Russian movie, curiously titled "The Last Journey." For reasons too exhaustive to relate, the agreement fell through at the last moment and the budding actor had to stay on earth while the magnificent filming equipment had already docked on the MIR. The cosmonauts took advantage of this fortunate occurrence to film scenes of life aboard ship, which gave rise to the previously mentioned scenes that have been of such interest to collectors.

But let's return to the filming to ask ourselves what an all-important commander of the MIR was doing handling letters and postmarking stamps that floated in a startling weightlessness around him. The answer is that he was carrying out one of his official duties, that of MIR Post Office Chief, a position that the Russian Administration created on 24 November 1988 and which was inaugurated by the then commander of the ship, Vladimir G. Titov. With that appointment an octagonal date-stamp postmarking arrived on board bearing the inscription: "MIR manned orbital complex. Postal section." - so appreciated by philatelists far and wide.

As is now well-known, the MIR, with its 20 tons of precious material, disintegrated on 23 March 2001 on reaching the atmosphere surrounded by heavenly fire and at a speed of 20.000 km. per hour while heading for the depths of the Pacific Ocean next to the Fiji islands. Among the material that melted



away were the postmarking stamps and postmarks that will never again will be used on any correspondence and thus the letters postmarked in space immediately became much rarer and consequently more valuable.

The best Astrophilatelic collections in the world, awarded with gold medal in the FIP exhibitions (International Philatelic Federation), jealously guard among their pages letters postmarked in the Space Station MIR: taken from and brought back to earth by different crews and even by the automatic supply rockets, "Progress". With the disappearance of the MIR, the race begins for many collectors to obtain the "most difficult yet" - one of the final 25 letters which, because of their extreme rarity, will bring collections definitively to the podium of the dreamed-of "Great Gold Medal", and from there to heaven.

The detailed nature of the daily work undertaken in deep space by the astronauts or cosmonauts, - whichever term you prefer - also prolonged to the registration of everything that arrived and left the ship and especially the correspondence that was so appreciated and sought-after.

The letters that trickled into the MIR from the earth were scrupulously registered and postmarked before being handed out to the addressees, who immediately floated slowly away to a private place, almost impossible to find on board, in order to pour over the news from loved ones.

AFINSA now is the guardian of these postal and philatelic jewels, which with their orbital postmarks provide the unmistakable proof of their history. There is further irrefutable evidence in this case: the film of the 25 final letters being postmarked one by one. Some men make history and others collect it in small pieces to enjoy at our leisure.