

Recollections
A Pilgrimage for Human Rights
By Daisaku Ikeda

Michel Baroin —
Champion of the Human Spirit

After his daughter's death, Michel Baroin decided to carry on her dream of being a bridge between people — for human rights.

Life cannot be stopped. It never looks back. It always moves forward. Whatever dark force may try to block its endless flow, life always overcomes it with an even greater force. Life knows no despair, even in the face of death's taunting dance. Life triumphs even over death, it pushes on.

Life is hope. Life is progress.

Michel Baroin. When I recall his name, I see before me the silhouette of a courageous man who made his way through the cold waves of a loved one's death and set sail on the vast, boundless sea of life.

I met him in Tokyo in January 1987. A person of great presence — a combination of the fragrance of rich earth and the dignity of polished stone — he radiated a passionate commitment to do what he believed was right.

At the time, he was traveling the world as the director of the Committee to Commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen [1989]. "The ideals of the French Revolution," he said to me, "were liberty, equality and fraternity. But today we must change their order to fraternity, liberty and equality. Only when we have true fraternity among people can we achieve liberty and equality."

Today, callous self-interest often runs rampant in the name of liberty. And cruel oppression often marches under the banner of equality. What we need is an alternative that avoids these failures.

The solution advocated by Mr. Baroin is a society of fraternity. He calls out for human beings to love one another, warning that unless we do, we have no future. The bicentennial of France's landmark human rights declaration was his opportunity to take that message to the world. And so he embarked on his journey, announcing the value of friendship to all. He described it as "a pilgrimage for human rights."

Just before he took on this mission, he experienced the most terrible of personal losses. His beloved daughter, Véronique, was killed in a car crash in April 1986. She was only 22.

In his book *The Power of Love*, Mr. Baroin wrote, in tribute to his daughter: "You were, for all of us, for your mother, your brother, your family, your grandmothers and your friends, the sun of life.... The short time you were here in this world, you chose to devote it to making us understand that life is gaiety, joy, smiles and laughter.... You did not forget at any time that life is also friendship, and that in order to maintain and expand friendship, one has to be there for others. And you were everywhere, bringing in your whirl of joy a word for everyone, always just right and so encouraging. And we loved you, my dear, everyone loved you for it."

Mr. Baroin's grief knew no limit. In an instant, the sun went from his life. It was a terrible shock, almost destroying his faith in life itself.

Though the serene smile on her face belied the tragic truth, his beloved daughter lay before him cold and lifeless. Death, he raged, what has she done to anger you? Was she too

full of love for others? Did you hate her, Death, because she loved life so much?

When his daughter died, something within him died. But something was born in him as well. He recalled Véronique's final message: "To be a bridge that brings people together." These words were his dearest keepsake — words that he would take with him even to the next world. He decided to make his daughter's dream his own. That way, she would remain alive through him.

Having lost that which was most precious to him, Mr. Baroin no longer feared anything. Addressing his daughter, he wrote, "I have decided to take up the challenge in your name, and for you." He closed his pledge "with a final kiss from your father for your eternal rest."

Mr. Baroin was appointed director of the 200th Anniversary Committee several months after his daughter's death. And his life began again. Many people, when they have lost a loved one, come to a stop — the clock of their heart no longer keeps time. But Mr. Baroin loved life too much.

He was born in 1930, and the Nazis occupied Paris when he was 9. His mother, a postal worker, and his father, a policeman, immediately joined the Resistance. The words *courage* and *duty* were the air he breathed day and night, influencing him profoundly.

He remembers one of his teachers during the Nazi occupation, his Latin master from Voltaire Junior High School, who used the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as a textbook, carefully going over each of its articles with them. The city groaned under the heavy boots of the occupying army, yet this teacher taught his students such immortal words as "Men are born free and remain free and equal in rights," and "These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety and Resistance to Oppression."

For the youth listening to this passion, the Declaration was not some musty, old document. It was a cry for liberation, here and now. It was the burgeoning energy of life, which no obstacle, no matter how heavy, could block for long.

After serving as a chief of police in Algeria, Mr. Baroin entered politics and was also active in business. Faith ran through all his many energetic pursuits — faith that society cannot change unless we change the individual. When he was in government, he insisted on listening to the people's voices, consulting with citizens before taking any action that affected them. He urged that officials and bureaucrats change their thinking and undertake, in his words, "a personal revolution."

As a businessman, he advocated business methods based on the needs of the people: to serve consumers and respond to their needs, as well as listen to the opinions and suggestions of his employees. Here, too, he stressed the necessity for individuals to work on inner change, on their human revolution.

No doubt Mr. Baroin was impatient. The world had advanced dramatically in science and technology. Education opportunities were widely available. The requirements for wonderful lives for all were in place. But why, then, was there so much conflict and discord? Why were the precious resources of our world being wasted?

In this sentiment, Mr. Baroin was in fine company. A century earlier, the great French author and poet Victor Hugo, in his "Eulogy to George Sand," described his time as "this century whose mission it is to complete the French Revolution and start on the human revolution."

Mr. Baroin read my novel *The Human Revolution* and, several years before we actually met, began communicating with me. Because Mr. Baroin felt a strong sympathy with the SGI's activities for peace and culture, the 1987 exhibition "The French Revolution and Romanticism" at the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum was designated the first international event of the 200th Anniversary Committee.

I will never forget how he humbly thirsted for knowledge, like parched earth drinking up

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the rain, when I spoke to him about the Buddhist concept of human revolution. “President Ikeda,” he said, “the world today seems to be deteriorating ever more rapidly. Our time here is short. That is why, in terms of carrying out my responsibility as a member of the human race, I want to make our celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen an event signaling the start of the third millennium.”

Our time here is short, as he said. Only 19 days later, on Feb. 6, 1987, he died in a plane crash over Cameroon in West Africa. When I visited Paris that June, I paid my respects to his wife and son, and I visited his grave with them. Washed by rain, the white tombstone in Vaugirard Cemetery gleamed brilliantly in the sunlight. “Your husband and father was a great man,” I said. I also shared the saying that a wave only grows stronger when it meets resistance, my sincerest wish being to encourage them in their time of loss.

Mr. Baroin was only 56. His life was brief. But there is something far worse than death: not to have truly lived while one was alive. Mr. Baroin lived life. He was always fully, heartily alive. He overcame all obstacles and moved forward. Even as he fell, he was in forward motion, and that, I believe, is proof of his final victory.

The year in which Mr. Baroin sought to open the curtain on the new millennium, 1989, turned out to be a year of momentous changes: the collapse of successive communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. It was, I believe, the first step toward an open society, a society of fraternity, in which humanity joins forces and creates the future.

Mr. Baroin’s plane crashed just days after he delivered the manuscript of *The Power of Love*, the autobiography he began when his daughter died, to his publisher. The book concludes with the following passage: “My daughter Véronique, who knew well how to catch the coach to the stars, would that we could dance the last waltz together in peace....”

Life may end, but the spirit lives on. Father and daughter alike shared a dream — the dream of making the world go round with love. Their waltz goes on forever now, just like the Earth’s rotation.

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