

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
BY DAISAKU IKEDA
RAISA GORBACHEV, FORMER SOVIET FIRST LADY**

Whenever I think of Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev, I am reminded of a story. “Once upon a time, there was a golden castle on top of a glass mountain. A prince and his princess lived there...”

On one occasion, I shared this story with the Gorbachevs. “The prince and the princess looked down and saw the suffering of the people below and they decided to come to their aid. They came out of their golden castle and down their glass mountain into the midst of society’s tempests, into the midst of the people.”

The couple smiled, modestly. Mr. Gorbachev said simply, “We are grateful for those words from a true friend.”

The Gorbachevs could easily have lived their lives in peace and comfort, protected behind the castle walls of state power. When Mr. Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, he had a position of absolute power within the Soviet Union. Who would ever have imagined what he would do with that power? Who would have thought that a man in that position would take action to limit his sweeping authority and open the gateway to democracy and liberty for the Russian people? Especially considering the potential danger that he could be washed away once he opened those floodgates? But Mr. and Mrs. Gorbachev turned their backs on safety and security.

Yet, how was that brave decision rewarded?

“President Ikeda,” Mr. Gorbachev once confessed to me, “for several years it was as if my wife and I were walking through a jungle. We have made our way through a forest of doubt, misunderstanding and prejudice.” Both Mr. and Mrs. Gorbachev look a person right in the eye. Mr. Gorbachev’s eyes are always sparkling with energy, and Mrs. Gorbachev’s gaze is earnestly intent. The fate of being revolutionaries was harsher than anything they could have imagined. Together they have walked the dangerous path on the edge between life and death.

While they had the overwhelming support of many citizens, there were conservative forces that sought desperately to protect their own vested interests as well as individuals intent on exploiting the upheaval to advance personal ambitions. No matter how tired the Gorbachevs were, they could not afford to rest. They had a responsibility to the people. If they collapsed, it would only give their enemies the advantage and a chance to strike. Every time we met, I said to them, “You must survive. Your survival will be your triumph.”

When Mr. Gorbachev stepped down from his presidency, most people treated him very badly. Few showed gratitude for his tremendous achievement in bringing about an end to the Cold War. Lies ran rampant. Attempts were even made to eradicate *perestroika*.¹ Mrs. Gorbachev recalls, “In the past I used to think that reality and history were firm, unchanging things that could not be rebutted. Now I know, however, that historians only look at the aspects of history that they choose to, and even simple facts can be twisted out of shape.”

The hardest thing for them to bear was the betrayal of friends and comrades. The very essence of *perestroika*, after all, was trust in others. But no matter how people betray or insult the truly great, they cannot destroy their dignity. In fact, it is only the reputations of the traitors and cowards that are sullied.

Mr. Gorbachev cared solely for the people. What appalling injustice was meted out to this decent man of character and integrity! Even when he was driven from the presidency, he said, "What happens to me is not important. If people want to behead me, crucify me, burn me at the stake—that is of little matter. The only thing that matters is whether our reform movement succeeds. That's all that counts." Immediately after he stepped down, I wrote to him. "Look to the future. Your life lies before you. Let us work together for the people of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries!"

Mrs. Gorbachev is an extremely level-headed, self-assured woman who possesses keen intelligence along with an open heart and endearing warmth. The good are always persecuted. How heavy the spiritual burden of standing at her husband's side and protecting him must have been! How many sleepless nights did she endure? Mrs. Gorbachev said to our interpreter, "Endurance. Life is a series of endurance tests."

MRS. Gorbachev's father was a railway worker. She was born in a country town in western Siberia in 1932. The family traveled all over the Soviet Union, moving again and again as her father was transferred from place to place. They rode in freight cars or trolleys. Her maternal grandfather was a farmer, but he was arrested without warning during Stalin's purges and "disappeared"—executed by a firing squad. Her grandmother was labeled "the wife of an enemy of the people," and was shunned by her fellow villagers. Eventually, she died of grief and starvation.

From the age of eight, Mrs. Gorbachev's mother worked day in and day out plowing the fields and spinning thread. She didn't have the opportunity to learn to read or write until after she married. That experience made her all the more determined that her children would not endure the tragedy of a lack of education. Mrs. Gorbachev was a good student, winning a gold medal for excellence in all her subjects and entering the philosophy department of Moscow State University. It was there, at that "citadel of learning," that she met Mr. Gorbachev, who was studying in the law department. They married while still students.

They returned to Stavropol, Mr. Gorbachev's hometown, and lived there for twenty-three years. Mrs. Gorbachev worked as a teacher. As a practical sociologist, she also visited all the surrounding villages and acquainted herself with farmers' lives. Donning high rubber boots, she trudged through the mud, going from house to house. She found women who were straining under the burden of heavy labor. She found women who had lost their husbands and loved ones in the war or the purges, women deprived of the chance to marry because so many men had been killed. She encountered chronic shortages of goods and food. She experienced the yawning gap between the picture the government presented and the reality of people's lives.

If *perestroika* can be described as a revolution of everyday common sense, it may be because Mrs. Gorbachev knew the everyday reality of the Russian people far better than any official of the central government. Mr. Gorbachev has said to me, "*Perestroika* is an alliance of government and culture." The Gorbachevs are the perfect symbol of that alliance, he the statesman and she the woman of culture.

What a wonderful relationship the Gorbachevs share! I remember when my wife and I welcomed them to Soka University's Man'yo House [in April 1993]. During our conversation, I remarked admiringly on Mrs. Gorbachev's discernment. She replied with a smile and a teasing glance at her husband, "Why, thank you. Let's just say that if I know anything, I owe it all to him." Without a moment's hesitation, Mr. Gorbachev replied, "You

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don't need to say that. Everyone already knows!" As we all laughed heartily, he added, "But the truth is, I owe as much to her as she does to me." Their mutual affection filled the room like a gentle spring breeze.

Mrs. Gorbachev became ill when they were placed under house arrest during the attempted coup d'état in August 1991. They were prepared for the worst—that their entire family might be killed. For two years after that Mrs. Gorbachev suffered poor health.

"When a wife isn't well," I said, "the husband suffers, too. He wants to suffer in her place."

"That's so true," replied Mr. Gorbachev.

Mrs. Gorbachev added, "Nothing makes me happier than to have my husband healthy and well."

The first time I met Mr. Gorbachev at the Kremlin in 1990, there was much speculation at home and abroad whether he would visit Japan. I opened the subject by remarking humorously that he and Mrs. Gorbachev had been unable to visit Japan on their honeymoon. "Why don't the two of you come to Japan in spring, when the cherry blossoms are in flower, or in the autumn, to see the maple leaves?" Mr. Gorbachev said that he would like to do so, and he made his first visit to Japan in the spring of the following year, in April 1991, where he was warmly welcomed by the Japanese people and government alike. After stepping down from the presidency, he continued to visit Japan each spring, in both 1992 and 1993, with Mrs. Gorbachev, just in time to see the cherry blossoms in April.

LAST year [1997], they visited in autumn and saw the beautiful fall leaves in the Kansai region. Though his trip to the United States had to be canceled for scheduling reasons, he was determined to come to Japan. "I must go," he said. "My friends are important to me." And he kept his promise to me. We were reunited at the Osaka Dome, where the World Peace Youth Culture Festival was being held. I asked him if he was tired by the journey. "Of course not!" the sixty-six-year-old Mr. Gorbachev replied. "I'm still in my prime!" He has an invincible spirit, always fighting fiercely to achieve his high ideals, no matter what a buffeting he may take.

As Mrs. Gorbachev watched the young people performing at the Dome, she kept saying "How beautiful! Just beautiful!" Though they were no longer in positions of political power, she and her husband shone. That's the mark of the great. They do not shine because of their positions; no, they make their positions shine with their personal brilliance.

Six years had passed since Mr. Gorbachev stepped down from the presidency. Mrs. Gorbachev said, "We have survived. We have done our best. My husband experienced much suffering and betrayal, but he has continued to fight for the sake of humankind. I, who have been by his side throughout, can testify that he is not fighting for his own interests. And those who betrayed him have, in the end, reaped the results of their acts."

As long as there is life, there is hope. Mrs. Gorbachev's speech at the Kansai Soka Junior and Senior High Schools was very moving. She spoke to the students slowly, giving weight and substance to each word. "You will experience all kinds of hurts in life. Not all of them will heal. Nor can you always realize all of your dreams. But there is something that you can achieve. There is a dream that you can make a reality.

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“Therefore, the person who triumphs in the end is the person who gets up after each fall and pushes onward. The ability to keep on fighting is a matter of the spirit. Death does not come to the person who is tired; it comes to the person who has stopped moving forward.”

In her words, I heard a paean to a victor in life. The title of Mrs. Gorbachev’s autobiography is *I Hope*. ◻

1. *perestroika*: The restructuring or reform of the Soviet economic and political system, first proposed at the 26th Party Congress in 1979 and actively promoted under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985.

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