

## Victor Hugo House of Literature By Stephanie Celano, Staff Writer

*“Light that makes whole. Light that enlightens. All fruitful social impulses spring from knowledge, letters, the arts and teaching. We must make whole men, whole men, by bringing light to them.”*

*Victor Hugo, Les Misérables*

THESE enduring words sum up Victor Hugo’s relentless struggle to inspire, educate and empower people during the turbulent times of the French Revolution. Born the son of a general, in Besançon in 1802, Hugo began writing at a very young age and never ceased. He published his first volume of poetry, *Miscellaneous Odes and Poems*, at age 20. His prodigious talents earned him the respect he deserved. The leader of the Romantic Movement, he was undoubtedly the most prominent literary figure of the nineteenth century, and his poems, plays, novels and criticisms continue to influence the whole of humanity in the twentieth century.

Vowing to uphold and protect the liberties of the French people, Hugo entered the political arena in the 1840s, and was eventually elected to the National Assembly. Both publicly and in the daily newspaper that he founded, *L’Événement*, he denounced the tyranny of Prince Louis-Napoleon—soon to be Napoleon III—urging the people to do their part: “Tyranny will continue to exist, in whatever guise it chooses to manifest itself, for as long as the citizens who live under its burden select to carry their chains without complaint. Those who truly hate tyranny fight it, either from within or without, depending on their personal circumstances” (*Victor Hugo A Tumultuous Life*, Edwards, p. 235). Hugo also spoke out vehemently against issues such as the death penalty, laws banning freedom of education and freedom of the press.

After a coup d’état, in 1851, by official decree from Napoleon III, Hugo was banished from France and fled to Belgium. In 1855, he began a fifteen-year exile on the island of Guernsey in the Channel Islands. It was during his exile that he produced the majority of his writings including *Les Châtiments*, *Napoléon le petit* and *Les Contemplations*, as well as *La Légende des siècles*. Hugo also completed *Les Misérables*, his longest and most famous work, a novel depicting the social injustice of nineteenth-century France.

Known as “a poet of the people,” Hugo’s undying love for the common people was unparalleled. Their love, in turn, was perhaps best exemplified at the time of his funeral. After lying in state beneath the Arc de Triomphe, on May 31, 1885, nearly 2 million mourning Frenchmen accompanied Hugo’s coffin through the streets from the Étoile to the Panthéon, bearing placards displaying the names of his most well-loved works. In the words of one critic, Hugo was “the last, and perhaps the only one, of our great poets, who succeeded in being both a wonderful artist for the delight of the discerning, and a bard understood and loved by the masses” (*Victor Hugo*, Richardson, p. x).

In honor of the universal and humanistic influence of Victor Hugo’s life and

Title: Victor Hugo House of Literature

Subject: Living Buddhism 09/98 v.2 n.9 p.44 LB9809p44

Author: Stephanie Celano

Keywords: Activities Activity Features Heroes House Hugo Literature People Report Victor

works, the Victor Hugo House of Literature was established by the SGI at the Château des Roches, in Bièvres, France, on June 21, 1991. Restored to its full glory, the château is now used as a museum and conference center dedicated to researching and presenting Hugo's works and memorabilia. It is an effort to "resurrect the soul" of Victor Hugo, so that people from around the world may continue to experience his immortal spirit.

At the opening, founder SGI President Daisaku Ikeda stated: "Hugo lived with an energy and intense emotion that people today have lost. The force of will that exists in *Les Misérables*, solid as a rock, a force that the writer always directed toward good, shakes my soul still today. For this strong will that never gave in to attack encouraged me so many times, as did his determination and love for the people.... Hugo is my eternal companion."

Revolving exhibits are sponsored relating to the influence of Hugo's works, as well as featuring the works of other great authors and artists. Last year SGI's exhibit, "Victor Hugo and the 21st Century," reflected how accurately the poet understood the time in which he lived. One might even describe Hugo as a visionary, because he foresaw changes in the world that would materialize in the following century. In a text that was written and read for the Congress of Peace in 1848, Hugo spoke of the "United States of Europe." In his book *Paris Guide*, Hugo depicted a nation sharing a common language and currency, one without borders. "This nation will be called Europe in the twentieth century and in the following centuries, after the next transformation it will be called Humanity."

Original notes of Hugo's acclaimed work *Quatrevingt-treize* (Ninety-Three) were also on display at the exhibit. Excerpted from the novel about the French Revolution, it is permeated by his own revolutionary spirit and humanism: "I want liberty in the mind, equality in the heart and fraternity in the soul. No! No more bondage! Man was made, not to drag chains, but to spread his wings" (*Quatrevingt-treize*, Valjean edition, P.F. Collier).

A similar sentiment is expressed in his writing "*Le droit et la loi*" (Your right and the law), where he explains: "All forms of progress are revolution. Revolution is what we do, what we think, what we speak, what we have on our tongues, in our stomach and our soul..."

According to Philippe Moine, director of the Victor Hugo House of Literature, hundreds of original works, handwritten manuscripts, old photographs and documents of all sorts concerning Hugo's youth, his loves, his years in exile and his political evolution have been gathered.

He writes: "These works, many of which were discovered outside of France, have found their place once again in our national heritage. The Victor Hugo House of Literature hopes to become an international meeting place for literature and the arts." □

THE Victor Hugo House of Literature was opened on June 21, 1991. There were more than 100 guests in attendance, including several French dignitaries and representatives from twelve countries. A special guest among them was Pierre Hugo, Victor Hugo's great-great-grandson.

SGI President Daisaku Ikeda stated in his commemorative address:

The great spiritual light that the nineteenth-century author Victor Hugo shone over this great nation of France continues to emit a vibrant brilliance to the world transcending time and place. For a long time, it has been my dream to pay tribute to the dazzling depth of Hugo's writings in some concrete form.... Two years ago [1989], the plans were announced that the establishment of the Victor Hugo House of Literature, at this house, the Château des Roches, which Hugo loved deeply during his lifetime. My wish was that it would serve as a rainbow of hope for the new century.... I am overjoyed that this castle of literature has been given a new lease on life in this way, wrapped in the warm embrace of the hearts of Hugo lovers around the world. (July 8, 1991, *World Tribune*, p. 8)

Located in Bièvres, a small village just southeast of Versailles, the Château des Roches belonged to Louis-François Bertin (1776–1841) during the French Romantic era. Between 1815 and 1841, as a patron of the arts and publisher of the activist magazine the *Journal des Débats*, Bertin's home became a literary center of sorts, attracting the company of some of the foremost thinkers in the world of politics and arts including Chateaubriand, Berlioz, Ingres, Liszt—Victor Hugo being the most renowned guest.

Victor Hugo, along with his wife and children, frequently vacationed at the château. The poet, greatly inspired by the ambiance and nearby parks, would go off alone to write or to walk in the valley of Bièvres. Several of his poems written during his visits were published in *Les Rayons et les Ombres*, *Les Feuilles d'Automne*, and *Les Chants du Crépuscule*. □