

Platform

By Takashima Hatsuhsa

There's a saying in Japan, "Even rumors die in 75 days." Well, more than 75 days have gone by since the incident on Jan. 26 in Tokyo, and yet it is still very much a subject of discussion, and in fact, the ripples created by the incident continue to spread. A little after 7 p.m. on that day, a tragic accident occurred when a somewhat inebriated man teetered and fell onto the tracks from Shin-Okubo platform on Yamanote Line. Two others on the platform, both men, immediately leapt down onto the tracks and were trying to rescue the man when a train came along and killed all three. The location happened to be a stretch of platform built on an overpass, and thus lacking the space normally available under the platform. Moreover, a fence on the other side of the tracks contributed to the sad outcome by blocking the only other means of escape. The train was only about 40 meters away from the end of the platform when the driver spotted the men in the tracks. He slammed on his brakes, but the situation was hopeless, and five seconds later, the three men lost their lives. At that time there were more than 200 people standing on the platform, but the incident happened so quickly that nothing could have altered the result.

One of the two men who lost their lives trying to help was Sekine Shiro, a 47-year-old professional photographer living in Yokohama. Sekine was an outdoor man who loved nature and specialized in underwater photography. The other man was Lee Su Hyon, a 26 year-old Korean student, a native of Pusan, who had interrupted his studies at Korea University to come and spend some time in Japan. Masses of Korean students study English to go to schools in the United States, but Lee was interested in Japan. He had been taking Japanese studies at university, and had come to Japan to study Japanese in

earnest at a language school in Tokyo.

There was a tremendous public reaction to Sekine's and Lee's selfless act. Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro not only sent letters to the grieving families of the two rescuers praising their bravery, but also met the families himself to offer his condolences, and sent a message to South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung saying Lee's brave and sublime act made a deep impression on the Japanese people and will serve to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two countries.

Lee in particular stirred the emotions of the Japanese, sacrificing as he did his own life to try to save the life of an absolute stranger in what was for him a foreign land. The language school he attended was inundated with letters, and the temple in Pusan where Lee's ashes now rest receives almost daily visits from Japanese wanting to offer prayers for Lee. Most major newspapers ran special pages of letters from readers. Many saw the men's selfless act as a shaft of light providing hope for the future in the otherwise gloomy landscape of stagnation, political chaos and a seemingly never-ending stream of deplorable incidents and accidents.

Apart from such direct reactions, the attention that the tragedy drew produced an interesting change in Japan's television and newspaper coverage following the accident. For one thing, they began to run much more detailed reports on similar platform accidents, which had never drawn much attention before.

Two days after the Shin-Okubo station accident, a high school student who suddenly felt ill fell onto the tracks from the platform of another station. A classmate immediately leapt down and managed to rescue him with the help of others on the platform, and the victim suffered only a fracture to a facial bone. A few days later at a station in a Tokyo



Lee Su Hyon's mother puts flowers on the platform at Shin-Okubo station as she pays her last respects to her son

suburb, a pregnant woman who fainted and fell from the platform was rescued by several men who jumped down onto the tracks despite the public address system announcing the imminent arrival of a train. The men disappeared without leaving their names. At another station a drunk man stumbled and fell towards the tracks just as a train was pulling in, and died instantly, crushed between the train and the platform.

It has gradually come to light since the Shin-Okubo station accident that many such accidents occur every year. There are about 130 incidents reported each year of people falling from platforms, with between 30 to 40 fatalities. These figures do not include suicides jumping from platforms into the path of oncoming trains: an almost daily occurrence. Moreover, some railway companies report such accidents only in the event of trains being held up for more than 10 minutes, and so the chances are that the actual number of accidental falls from platforms is considerably more than the reported 130. According to a survey conducted several years ago by an organization for the visually handicapped on 100 of its members,

half had fallen from platforms at least once, and a full two-thirds of the totally blind among them had experienced falls.

As these facts emerged in the follow-up reporting of the accident, Japan's mass media finally began to pay serious attention to the dangers awaiting users of Japan's station platforms. The number of people getting on and off trains at Shin-Okubo station averages 35,000 a day. Of all 29 stations on the Yamanote Line, which serves hundreds of thousands of commuters each day, this is one of the smallest daily volumes, and it turns out that no station staff were posted to the platform at night, and few other safety measures were in place to prevent accidents. Moreover, a special report carried by a local Tokyo newspaper in the wake of the accident revealed not only that the station was designed in such a way that people falling onto the tracks had no means of escape other than back up onto the platform, but also that the same danger lurked at many other stations too.

During the morning and evening rush hours, trains travel the Yamanote Line, which encircles the center of Tokyo, at intervals of only two and a half minutes, carrying 87,000 passengers per hour. The platforms of every station teem with people, and at night the stations also cater to a fair number of inebriated passengers unsteady on their feet, and so the circumstances are ripe for accidents to occur at any time.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport undertook a serious review of the situation, and issued special instructions to all railway companies to strengthen platform safety measures. East Japan Railway Co. (JR East), which operates 70 rail lines, including the Yamanote Line and *shinkansen* bullet trains, serving 16 million passengers per day in total, has increased the number of emergency stop buttons installed on platforms to stop trains in an emergency situation, made the buttons more conspicuous and easier to spot, installed sensor mats for detecting fallen persons and stopping trains, and installed steps to enable

people to climb back up onto the platform after a fall.

There are however, calls for more effective solutions, particularly barriers to prevent people from falling onto tracks. The recently opened Nanboku Line subway enclosed the platforms of all 19 stations with walls and gates which are spaced at intervals coinciding with train doors and which open and close automatically in unison with train doors. The Tokyu Meguro Line, which links with the Nanboku Line, also fitted such a barrier system to its platforms. Perceived now as the ultimate platform accident prevention solution, similar systems are also employed on the platforms of new Paris Metro Lines, Singapore's subway stations, the Tokyo Waterfront New Transit stations and other lines. Such a system on the Yamanote Line, with its short intervals between trains and burgeoning passenger numbers, is all the more necessary, but JR East is proving to be extremely reluctant about enclosing the line's platforms.

Apparently installing such a system would not only cost JR East several hundred million yen per station, but the system's automatic doors would also require the use of safety sensors to prevent the closing of doors while passengers are still trying to enter a carriage. And as a result, its trains would be unable to continue performing their present hazardous tightrope act of carrying as many as 87,000 passengers an hour and circulating at a frequency of one every 2.5 minutes. JR East explains that is the major reason for its reluctance.

However, it goes without saying that safety precautions based on the premise that people will fall onto the tracks – precautions such as JR East's emergency stop buttons, fallen person sensor mats and steps to climb back onto the



All platforms of the Nanboku Line subway are enclosed with walls and gates

platform – clearly do not comprise a satisfactory solution. Shima Hideo, the engineer who fathered the *shinkansen* bullet train, had been calling for the need for enclosed platforms ever since the only son of a relative lost his life when he was pushed off a platform into the path of an oncoming train. Shima left his views for all to read in an essay titled, "Platform ni Rankan wo (Platforms Need Balustrades)," which is included in a posthumous collection of his writings.

Since I happen to live near the Nanboku Line's Meguro station, I frequently use the totally enclosed platform, the ultimate platform accident prevention measure, and when I do, I always feel that Shima's plea is not an impossible one to fulfill. The more I ponder the deaths of those two brave people, Sekine and Lee, the more I too pray that any available technology, funds and manpower necessary would not be spared to fit all stations, particularly the busy city platforms where the risk is highest, with some form of barrier to prevent further occurrence of these tragic accidents. **JTI**

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