

THE NEW HUMAN REVOLUTION
'AT THE HELM'
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The Niigata and Uetsu members finally make it home. On his return to Japan, Shin'ichi Yamamoto learns of their ordeal and makes sure that all of them are OK.

At their respective lodgings for the night, the Niigata and Uetsu members were served heartwarming meals by their hosts. Many of them were also able to take hot baths. It was their first opportunity to bathe in five or six days since leaving for the head temple the night of Jan. 21.

The housing arrangements had been made so quickly that in some cases there wasn't enough bedding to go around. So people had to sleep closely packed together with their feet tucked under the heated kotatsu table [a low table with a heat source underneath, usually covered with a quilt]. But they were simply grateful to sleep stretched out in a warm room.

Everyone felt deeply indebted to the Nagaoka members. Wanting to repay this kindness in some small way, some of the stranded members voluntarily shoveled snow from the roofs of their hosts' homes, while others helped out with the housework. This experience formed solid, enduring bonds of friendship among the members of Niigata, Uetsu and Nagaoka chapters — bonds that for some remain stronger than blood ties to this day.

Early the morning of Jan. 27, the Niigata and Uetsu members returned to the train. They had been told they would probably depart for Niigata at 9:00 a.m., but that time came and went. The train didn't budge. It turned out that just before their scheduled departure, a locomotive had derailed from one of the tracks at Nagaoka Station, holding them up again.

Around 4:00 p.m., two representatives of the Komei-kai parliamentary group of Upper House legislators hailing from the Soka Gakkai, Hiroshi Yamagiwa and Hiroshi Asada, flew to Nagaoka by helicopter to survey the storm damage in Niigata Prefecture and other parts of the Hokuriku region. They were the first members of parliament to rush to the scene of the natural disaster as soon as travel became possible. Cheers rose from the train when the stranded passengers caught sight of them. The members were overjoyed and reassured when they saw the Komei-kai representatives' serious commitment to their jobs, losing no time to come to those areas that had been hardest hit by the blizzard.

There were other trains stuck at Nagaoka Station besides the chartered train carrying the Soka Gakkai members. Yamagiwa and Asada immediately set about gathering information from the passengers, station personnel and local residents. While assessing the situation, they also worked on coming up with a rescue and relief strategy.

What surprised the lawmakers most after their survey was the fact that there was no clearly established line of command for initiating and coordinating emergency relief activities, and that there was absolutely no cooperation among Japan National Railways, the Self Defense Forces and the local fire and rescue services. As a result, those bodies didn't even have the same information.

The evening of Jan. 27 came, and the train still showed no signs of moving. But the Niigata and Uetsu members were calm and in high spirits, having been rejuvenated by the relaxing time they had spent at the homes of their fellow members.

As dusk fell, angry shouts could be heard, and pandemonium broke out at the station.

Frustrated and annoyed, passengers on the regular trains were demanding that the station personnel get the trains running again.

That same evening, just after 9:00, President Shin'ichi Yamamoto returned to Japan from his overseas trip. General Director Koichi Harayama and other leaders who had come to meet him told him about the blizzard on his arrival at Tokyo International Airport in Haneda. Shin'ichi's face clouded when he heard that the chartered train carrying 900 Niigata and Uetsu members, on its way back from a visit to the head temple, was still stranded at Nagaoka Station.

"That's terrible," he said. "Has anyone fallen ill?"

"There were a few people with chronic health conditions," Harayama answered, "but I understand they've been taken to a local hospital as a precaution. Other than that, we've only had reports of several people coming down with slight colds."

"I see. Please make sure that everything possible is done to assist and support the stranded members."

When Shin'ichi arrived home after 11:00, he immediately sat down in front of the Gohonzon and did gongyo and chanted daimoku, praying earnestly for the members' health and safety.

Around the same time back at Nagaoka Station, the stationmaster informed Niigata Chapter Leader Kinji Eda and the other leaders that their train should be departing around midnight. In spite of the late hour, Nagaoka Chapter Leader Masashi Takekawa and several other local chapter leaders gathered at the station to see the Niigata and Uetsu members off.

At 12:08 a.m., Jan. 28, the station bell sounded announcing the departure of the Niigata-bound train. Some 93 hours had passed since the train first stopped at Miyauchi Station. The passengers opened the train windows and called out thanks to the Nagaoka members.

One member on board reached out to grasp Takekawa's hand and said: "Thank you for all you've done for us. I will never forget the kindness of the Nagaoka Chapter members as long as I live. I'm sure that every time I pass through Nagaoka, I will remember this experience. Thank you! Please thank everyone who has been so kind."

The train pulled away from the station and all the Nagaoka members waved goodbye. The passengers waved back, their outstretched arms visible until the train disappeared in the darkness.

As the train moved forward, the Niigata and Uetsu members breathed a sigh of relief, certain that they would reach their destination of Niigata Station at last. But the train traveled very slowly, stopping and starting several times along the way. Though the trip would normally have taken only two hours—even by a local train—it took twice that long before the chartered train arrived at Niigata Station shortly after 4:00 a.m., Jan. 28. Some 109 hours had passed since they had left the head temple around 3:00 p.m., Jan. 23.

It had been a long, long journey home. But a deeper commitment to faith now burned brightly in the members' hearts.

Daisaku Ikeda appears in the
novel as Shin'ichi Yamamoto.
The events take place in 1963.