



Minamata: The Story of the Poisoning of a City, and of the People Who Choose to Carry the Burden of Courage

W. Eugene Smith, Aileen M. Smith

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Minamata is a fishing and farming town on the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. Its people joined the industrial age when the Chisso Corporation built a chemical factory there. The disaster that then befell them, and the ways in which some have managed to respond, reach far beyond Japan. Their courage is a flag of hope for all life - but it will have signaled no victory unless it awakens other people to action in every corner of this planet. An uneasiness developed in the town in the early 1950's. Many individuals fell ill with the same symptoms: limbs and lips tingled and then became numb; speech slurred; motor functions went out of control. Some died. Was this strange new disease contagious? Nobody knew. Minamata's disease was recognized as methyl mercury poisoning from industrial wasters. The mercury reached people through contaminated fish. Some doctors suggested that the number of persons affected might reach 10,000. So far 103 have died and some 700 others have been verified seriously - and permanently - damaged. As groups of victims pressed a turbulent, multi-sided crusade to force industry and government to take responsibility, W. Eugene Smith and his wife, Aileen, moved to Minamata. The result of their collaboration is an enduring document that crowns the work of one of the world's great photographers.

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