

CHAPTER

1

The Minamata Disaster and the True Costs of Japanese Modernization

In 1900, Minamata Bay was a sleepy fishing village, located on the west coast of the Japanese island of Kyushu about 560 miles southwest of Tokyo. The bay was nature's bounty. The ocean served up a rich variety of seafood, and its tidal shallows were a veritable sea garden filled with clams, oysters, and sea cucumbers. The rituals and rhythms of fishing—the building of small boats and weaving of nets, and the predawn venture out to sea and arrival back at the docks at dusk—created a community based on an intensely intimate relationship with the natural world. It was a low-tech venture: mostly wood and thread spun, shaped, and hewed into various fishing implements. Identity in the fishing community of Minamata emerged from labor in the natural world and from working with natural materials to harvest the waters. Life was hard and poverty endemic, to be sure, but the waters, at least, provided a livelihood and a way of life.

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CHISSO CORPORATION

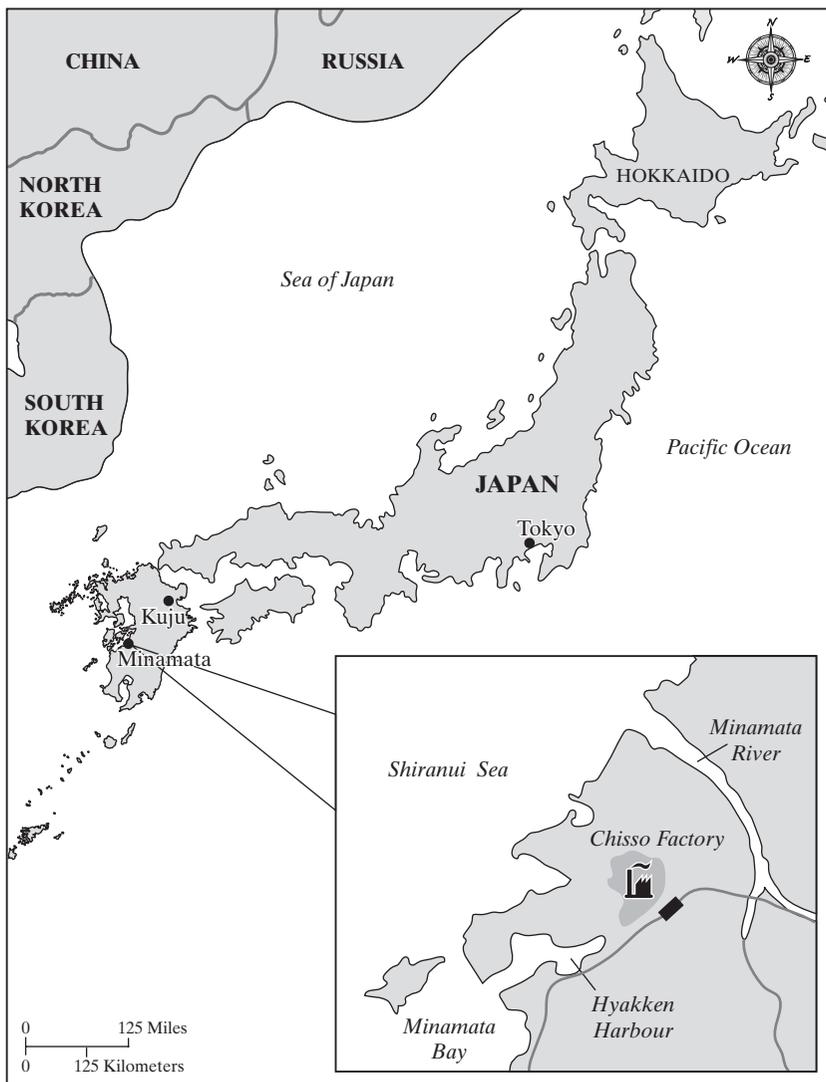
However, a newer community soon came to Minamata, an industrial community funded and employed by the Chisso Corporation. The chemical giant was founded as an electric power company in 1906 by an electrical engineering graduate of Tokyo University—Japan's Harvard. To use surplus energy, the company in 1907 and 1908 built a chemical fertilizer plant in the coastal town of Minamata. The drama and unexpected turns of Japanese modernization are written into the history of this corporation, as Japan competed with Europeans and Americans at their own game of modernization with the help of businesses such as Chisso. Initially, the company produced hydroelectric power to compensate for the nation's lack of oil and other energy sources. In the 1920s and 1930s, as Japan sought to establish its dominance in East Asia, the company dramatically expanded the production of chemical fertilizers to maximize agricultural production on Japan's scarce land resources.

Eager to avoid the fate of China, whose economic underdevelopment made the country easy prey for American and European interests, Japanese leaders married capitalist industrial progress to the authoritarian structures of traditional Japanese society. Individuals were expected to bow down before corporate and state authority, enduring hardship and sacrifice for the sake of Japanese industrial might. That was especially true in the 1930s. In 1932, Chisso began producing acetaldehyde, a chemical used to manufacture drugs, plastics, and an array of industrial products, many of them critical for fulfilling Japan's own imperial ambitions in East Asia. The company used inorganic mercury as a chemical catalyst, producing methyl mercury as a waste by-product, which it dumped directly into the bay until 1968.

Like the mythological phoenix rising from the ashes, Chisso stepped up production following World War II, determined to build a chemical future on the ruins of devastating defeat. The humiliation and devastation of defeat in World War II—culminating in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—intensified the desire among Japanese politicians and citizens to rebuild and modernize after the war. Chisso, like Japan more generally, boomed during the 1950s, coupling Minamata to the bullet train of Japan's post-World War II economic miracle. The industrial jobs provided by Chisso marked the transformation of Minamata from a supposedly "backward" agrarian

and fishing community to a modern industrial society. Alongside the traditional fishing community of Minamata, whose waters were increasingly fouled, Chisso had created a factory town.

Lingering feudal structures and attitudes reinforced Chisso's authority and power in Minamata. White-collar Chisso executives lived in the center of the town, occupied in feudal times by the



MAP 1.1 Japan and surrounding countries, with an inset showing Minamata

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daimyo, or lord, and his samurai retainers. The 5,000 or so workers employed by Chisso (and the families and subsidiary businesses that relied on their salaries) depended on an industrial process that dumped tons of mercury-laced treatment water into the bay. Moreover, their relationship to Chisso management and its industrial processes defined their individual and community identities. Unlike many of the fishermen, Chisso worker identities and livelihoods were rooted in the factory compound rather than in the natural world. Put starkly, their survival seemed to require (though they were hardly aware of it at first) the end to fishing in Minamata—and to the community that had depended upon it.

DISTURBING SIGNS

The devastation of the fishing community of Minamata was, in effect, the bill of Japanese industrialization come due. It was a familiar story, whereby those who bore the costs of industrialization were not its primary beneficiaries. In 1953, Minamata residents first noticed that cats and dogs fed fish scraps from the docks of Minamata Bay began to suffer from strange convulsions and bizarre behavior—dancing wildly, tearing at themselves, foaming at the mouth, and flinging themselves into the ocean to die. Crows crashed wildly into the rocks and dropped dead from the sky. Residents began to suffer alarming symptoms, including uncontrollable tremors and convulsions, loss of speech and hearing, and numbness. Those symptoms, it was later learned, resulted from methyl mercury compounds, which were present in the local daily diet of contaminated seafood, that had penetrated the nervous system. They were the classic symptoms of “mad-hatter disease,” the name derived from an earlier instance of mercury poisoning in the nineteenth century that afflicted English hatters who worked with mercury-treated felt and fur. In the case of the Minamata residents, the mercury transformed brain cells and other areas of the nervous system into a black, spongy mass. The mercury also accumulated in the placenta of pregnant women, giving fetuses a concentrated dose. Affected children were born with conditions similar to cerebral palsy, only with permanently deformed brains and limited intelligence. Kazumitsu Hannaga was one such child—born to a paralyzed father and abandoned by his shocked mother in 1955. He spent most of his life in a hospital, his head tilted

to one side and his deformed, spindly legs curled up under his wheel chair. In 1956, the Japanese medical community and media coined the phrase “Minamata disease” to describe his condition, but its cause was still a mystery. Some thought it was contagious, so they placed victims in isolated wards and insane asylums.

While the medical experts pleaded ignorance, many locals believed that Chisso had something to do with their condition. The fishermen, for instance, noticed that the fish near the Chisso pipes floated dead on top of the water. They began petitioning local authorities for help in the late 1950s. Numerous political and cultural factors, however, stood in the way of the Minamata activists, who struggled mightily for nearly two decades before corporate and state officials acknowledged the true source of their misery.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL OBSTACLES

Under American occupation, the Japanese awoke in the new year of 1947 and discovered that they had been transformed from subjects with limited rights to citizens of a constitutional democracy. However, democratic institutions rarely emerge so quickly, especially at the end of a bayonet (or in Japan’s case, amidst the radioactive fallout of two atomic bombs). Compared to the United States, the Japanese had a weak tradition of community activism and local democracy, hardly fertile ground for the imposition of a new constitutional order by outside American occupiers. Since the Meiji Restoration of 1867, which initiated a period of intense modernization under the Japanese emperor, newspapers, schools, government officials, and corporate leaders had inculcated in the country’s inhabitants a belief that industrialization and individual sacrifice were essential to Japan’s survival as a nation—and to its ability to fend off Western industrial powers. Individuals were treated more as subjects with duties and obligations and less as citizens with inalienable rights.

The spirit of individual and communal sacrifice carried over into the post–World War II period, creating an extremely hostile environment for grassroots activism—especially when directed against as powerful a force in local and national politics as the Chisso Corporation. While the Chisso Corporation provided jobs, for politicians it was the feeding hand that no one dared to bite. Using the company’s charitable donations and taxes, the regional government, known in

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Japan as a “prefecture,” built and operated schools and hospitals. Moreover, according to the dominant value system of Japan’s modernizers, the supposedly traditional and “backward” Minamata fishermen were destined to disappear. They were relics of the past, in stark contrast to the Chisso Corporation, which politicians and journalists continued to glorify after the war as an agent of national progress.

Challenging Chisso was therefore akin to challenging Japanese progress—a quixotic, seemingly insane, and antisocial endeavor from the perspective of most Japanese. Even conceptions of “pollution” in Japanese culture worked against the victims (though this was hardly unique to Japan, as the other case studies illustrate). The Japanese word for pollution, *kogai*, means “public nuisance,” something that destroys a harmonious civic life. Pollution can, therefore, be social or physical, a challenge to the social status quo or an actual physical threat to the community’s health. In the Japanese cultural context, those who talked about pollution and demanded justice could therefore be seen as the most dangerous polluters, since their complaints threatened and disturbed the existing order.

The fishermen also had practical economic reasons to keep their condition private. To speak of the disease, should it be linked to the fish they ate would destroy their livelihood. Besides, others within the fishing community no doubt had relatives and friends who worked in the factory. Many fishermen, moreover, were ashamed of their physical weakness and afraid that talking about it would lead to ostracism for themselves and their families. As in most societies of the 1950s, including the United States, physically deformed and mentally impaired people were hidden away—put in asylums or otherwise shut behind closed doors. The socially accepted response to pollution and extreme physical suffering was silence, not public questioning. The ailing fishermen and their families discovered they were no good for Minamata, even (and most damningly) in their own view of themselves.

LIFTING THE VEIL OF SILENCE

Ultimately, the authority of scientific research and expertise helped to lift the veil of silence and shame. Of all things, a Chisso employee, a conscientious medical doctor named Dr. Hajime Hosokawa,

conducted the critical piece of research that proved Chisso was the source of Minamata disease. In the late 1950s, Hosokawa tested waste water from Chisso's pipes on cats, demonstrating to his own great dismay that it produced all the symptoms of Minamata disease. In 1957, scientists from Kumamoto University, working with Dr. Hosokawa, released a study arguing that the victims became sick due to ingesting heavy metals in fish caught from Minamata Bay. In 1959 they confidently affirmed that Chisso was the source of the mercury. The story at this point took a turn characteristic of all the case studies of this book. Dr. Hosokawa faced intense pressure from his employer to end his investigation. While Chisso denied all claims that it was the source of contamination, the Japan Chemical Industry Association in 1959 produced a report claiming the disease could not possibly be linked with mercury. The Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry—whose mandate was industrial development and not environmental protection—suspended all ongoing government scientific studies on Minamata.

In 1959, 4,000 outraged fishermen demanded an audience with Chisso management, which had offered them small "sympathy" payments to compensate them for dirtying their waters. Angrily rejecting the adequacy of the proposed payments, they stormed the factory compound, an action that threatened to shut down its operations and put thousands of employees out of work. As Chisso dug in its heels and refused to offer more money or admit any guilt, the fishermen issued forth a barrage of petitions to politicians at all levels, gradually abandoning the tone of humble supplication present in their first petitions. They picketed the company headquarters and operations. They gave interviews with newspapers and choreographed demonstrations to maximize negative publicity for Chisso, hoping to shame the corporation into further action.

The militancy of the fishermen in 1959 turned out to be a tactical mistake, a step ahead of the more radical politics of the late 1960s. Instead of compensation and medical help, the Minamata activists received a sobering lesson in the limits of Japan's postwar democracy. Local politicians uniformly sided with Chisso, condemning the fishermen. Local authorities, with some justice, feared that demands to change Chisso's production system would mean the loss of jobs and taxes. Chisso, meanwhile, shrewdly framed the conflict in terms of jobs, pitting workers of the factories—the "future" of Minamata—against the livelihood of the fishermen, supposedly Minamata's

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backward past. Industrial workers and their families dutifully joined the chorus of condemnation, attacking the fishermen's demands. A coalition of local labor unions held a press conference to denounce the company critics. Residents shunned the fishermen, treating them like lepers. Shop owners refused to serve them, and when they did they often demanded that money be left on the floor, which the proprietor would pick up disdainfully with chop sticks.

The political winds in 1959 were clearly blowing against the fishermen. In December 1959, following the public backlash against the activists, Chisso reduced its offer of "sympathy" payments to the victims to one-tenth the original offer. It also made recipients pledge to end all future protests or legal actions against the company and acknowledge that the company had nothing to do with their illness. The timing was intentional. Bills came due at the end of the year, so victims and their families were under intense pressure to pay off mounting debts from fishing and medical treatment. In the meantime, Chisso continued dumping mercury directly into the bay.

Adding insult to injury, news of the controversy destroyed the market for Minamata's fish. The governor of the local prefecture imposed a ban on the sale of fish from the bay, curiously, while simultaneously supporting the official Chisso position that there was no contamination problem. From the perspective of 1960, following Chisso's "resettlement" with the fishermen, it appeared as if the victims had suffered a humiliating defeat. Advancing Japan's national economic interests still seemed to require the poisoning of the environment—and the destruction of the livelihood and health of those who depended upon it.

THE BATTLE REJOINED

Just as the Minamata controversy seemed to be fading from public memory, a new outbreak of a similar disease occurred in Niigata in 1965, another prefecture of Japan. A researcher at Niigata University began investigating the latest outbreak of what the medical textbooks now called "Minamata disease," this time caused by another company. Breaking his company-enforced silence, Dr. Hosokawa, the Chisso Corporation physician whose earlier research had shown a link between mercury dumping and the disease, joined the team of researchers in Niigata.

On June 12, 1967, thirteen victims in Niigata were persuaded by maverick lawyers and activists (despite harassment by corporate thugs) to file Japan's first pollution lawsuit. The breakthrough in the trial came when Dr. Hosokawa testified about his earlier experiments reproducing the symptoms of the Minamata disease in lab animals. His evidence turned the tide of the Niigata case, and the government finally acknowledged in 1968 that mercury dumping had been a probable (though not definitive) cause of the disease suffered in Niigata. While not implicated in the decision, Chisso understood its potential liability and immediately stopped pouring mercury into Minamata Bay, more than 35 years after it began the dumping.

Emboldened by the example of the Niigata victims, 112 patients from 39 families in Minamata filed a lawsuit against Chisso on June 14, 1969. At first, it seemed as if the outcome of the case would turn on scientific proof, as in the Niigata case. But the Chisso Corporation was determined to defend itself from any admission of criminal guilt and further compensation payments. Basing their conclusions on scientific studies funded by the government and the company, Chisso lawyers argued that the scientific evidence was "inconclusive." Even if industrial pollution had caused the disease, they said it was impossible to prove that Chisso's waste pipes were the source.

ATOMIC BOMBS, GODZILLA, AND THE CULTURE OF VICTIMIZATION

If the science involved in the issue proved indecisive and adaptable, the social and political climate in Japan, compared to the late 1950s, was far more favorable toward the Minamata victims. During the 1960s, Japanese political values had shifted rapidly with the rise of a new generation after World War II. The shift mirrored changes in much of the world in the 1960s. In the United States, for example, a new environmental consciousness emerged in response to books such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, a critical moment in drawing worldwide attention to the dangers of widespread chemical use. Inspired in part by American civil rights activists of the 1960s, Japanese citizens expressed a new willingness to confront corporate and political authorities, a willingness that reflected a desire to move away from pre-World War II authoritarianism and toward a more democratic, postwar order.

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Many Japanese were also beginning to think of themselves as consumers and not just as producers. In contrast to the lean and desperate postwar years of the 1950s, people wanted to enjoy the Japanese economic miracle of the 1960s. Preparing, displaying, and consuming seafood in a myriad of forms became an essential part of modern Japanese identity and consumer culture. Fish had symbolic and cultural power and not simply a caloric value. The Minamata fishermen exploited that cultural value to draw attention to their plight. In July 1973, for example, the union of Minamata fishermen dumped 5 tons of fresh sardines at the main gate of Chisso in protest of the contamination of the seas from the company's drains. Such actions drove home the message to Japanese consumers that Minamata's plight affected them personally.

Finally, the Minamata victims skillfully turned their suffering from liability to asset. It was a strategy that many Japanese had used to deal with the humiliating defeat of World War II. Rather than seeing their nation as war criminal and aggressor in World War II, many Japanese redefined themselves as victims of American aggression. In shockingly lurid details, hundreds of documentaries, books, art exhibits, and newspaper accounts recounted the suffering of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By the 1960s, these cultural productions legitimated public displays of victimization, physical suffering, and pain, thus transforming Japan from imperialist aggressor into victim of American militarism. Simultaneously, as in the United States of the 1960s, a counterculture began to question the costs of industrial development. Opponents of Japan's accelerated modernization criticized the pollution, pace, and sacrifices of modern industrial life. The movie monster Godzilla was the mutant, radioactive creature from the sea terrorizing the Japanese public with her toxic breath (the monster was a she). Godzilla, like the atomic bomb, presented the Japanese people as victims of modern science and industry, rather than its beneficiaries.

By the early 1970s, the Minamata activists struck a deep public chord, joining their cause to this growing culture of victimization. One victim, Michiko Ishimure, wrote a stirring account in 1970 of the Minamata tragedy, titled simply *Paradise of the Bitter Sea*. A shy, retiring housewife, Ishimure stepped out of the kitchen and into the public arena. Along the way she found a literary and political voice, an instance of women's empowerment replicated in the other

case studies. Her book presented a powerful tale of the plight of the victims, combined with a nostalgic and lyrical description of the natural world and the human–nature relationship that Chisso had supposedly destroyed. It was both a milestone in Japanese literature and an inspiration for environmental activism in Japan.

Ishimure relied not on science to sway opinion, but on emotion and pathos, as did other activists. One 1971 documentary, entitled simply *Minamata*, combined a terse retelling of the facts of the case with painfully evocative images of mental impairment, paralysis, blindness, and death. The images, much more than the data, seemed to speak for themselves—and they told a story that always cast the Minamata victims in the role of heroic martyr and Chisso into the role of irredeemable villainy. After showing the suffering of the victims, the film climaxed with footage of a dramatic confrontation in 1970 between victims and the unsympathetic management of Chisso. A Tokyo lawyer counseled the victims to buy one share each of Chisso stock, which would give them the right to attend the company shareholders' meeting in Osaka. The victims, one-thousand strong, tapping into Buddhist customs, draped themselves in the white robes of pilgrims and recited Buddhist chants in unison. They rang small bells rhythmically, a symbolic call to the dead victims to join them in their fight. At the end of the meeting, the women among the victims rushed to the stage where Chisso's president sat. They raised memorial tables of deceased family members and implored the president to understand that Chisso's mercury had caused their suffering. The confrontation in 1970 was a dress rehearsal for a dramatic confrontation three years later that would mark another turning point in the struggle.

While the wheels of justice turned ever so slowly following the filing of the court case in 1969, a number of Minamata victims continued the tactic of directly confronting Chisso and government officials. As with the civil rights activists of the United States in the 1960s, the Minamata victims counted on persecution by Chisso to turn public opinion in their favor—and to shame corporate and government officials into action. They recognized a simple but powerful truth: Waiting for the lawyers and scientific experts to come to their rescue, as previous experience had shown, was a fool's errand. The system would not act on their behalf unless they forced it to do so.

SEEKING JUSTICE OUTSIDE THE COURTS

Teruo Kawamoto was one of the most militant of the activists. Born in 1931 to a fisherman, he was the eighth of 11 children, four of whom had died of malnutrition. He married in 1957 and almost immediately began to suffer from partial paralysis of his limbs and a stiffening of his tongue (relatively mild symptoms of Minamata disease). His father, however, suffered from acute symptoms of the disease and was completely bedridden. Duty-bound to the Confucian virtue of filial piety, a key element in Japanese culture, Kawamoto studied as an assistant nurse and took care of his father in a mental hospital as he died an agonizing and excruciatingly painful death. Thereafter, driven by grief and a sense of duty to his father, he devoted himself to finding and registering victims of Minamata disease. From 1971 to 1973, Kawamoto orchestrated sit-in campaigns. He set up a tent encampment outside the Chisso corporate headquarters. He worked with sympathetic journalists and environmental activists to publicize the Minamata case. After one skirmish with thugs from Chisso in 1972, the company sued him for assault, a case that Kawamoto won only after an eight-year legal battle decided by the Japanese Supreme Court.

Personally familiar with the halls of justice, Kawamoto believed the formal setting of a courtroom was devoid of emotion and tended to reinforce rather than challenge existing hierarchical relationships in society. He had learned firsthand the limited possibility of justice within the confines of a courtroom. Instead, he pushed for a face-to-face meeting with the president. Such a meeting would flatten the hierarchical arrangements of the courtroom and establish the relation between the company and victims as equals. It would also allow the victims to appeal to the emotions and feelings of the public rather than relying solely on the testimony of scientific experts, who always seemed to conclude that the data were "inconclusive."

Even when the Minamata victims who had sued Chisso in 1969 won their case in March 1973, Kawamoto was unimpressed and continued to demand an audience with the president of Chisso. Kawamoto, like many victims, demanded a public, personal apology from the president of Chisso and not merely financial compensation. "What we really wish to see," he said, "is the responsible people of the company becoming sensitized to those pains and sufferings of trees, fish, sea, and mountains, as well as us humans." A dramatic denouement came in August 1973, when Kawamoto and his group of

patients finally received an audience with President Shimada of Chisso. A week's worth of tense negotiations ensued. At one point, Kawamoto asked Shimada if he was a religious man and if he prayed. Shimada admitted that he did and that he had a small room with a shrine on which the names of Minamata victims were inscribed. Nonetheless, Shimada told Kawamoto that the company could not provide the money that the victims wanted—it was simply too much. Suddenly, a victim arose, shaking violently. "I can't stand this any more! You can see for yourself. If I don't get the indemnity money, I can't live!" The victim grabbed a glass ashtray, broke it on the table, and slit his wrists with it. As blood spurted out, the shocked president muttered: "Yes, yes, yes—we will pay."¹

And pay they did. In addition to making a formal personal apology to the victims, the president agreed to compensation of approximately \$60,000 plus medical expenses to all victims and not just those who filed the suit. Chisso later paid compensation to various groups of fishermen across Japan whose livelihood, due to depressed demand for their catch, had been destroyed by the controversy. The financial strains of the case were so great that the Japanese government had to engineer a bailout for the Chisso Corporation in 1978—in part to ensure that Chisso, the main source of jobs for Minamata, would be able to continue paying compensation to victims.

As a result of the Minamata struggle, balancing environmental protection and economic growth had become a new political imperative. In March 1979, Japanese courts concluded the first criminal conviction for pollution, sentencing two Chisso executives to two years in prison. The determination to pursue polluters with criminal charges, combined with substantial awards to victims and costs for cleanup (totaling nearly \$2 billion), stands in stark contrast to the other case studies in this book. In the end, nearly 2,250 patients were designated as victims.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE JAPANESE CASE

A confluence of factors distinguished the Japanese case from the other case studies in this book. Corporate and government officials certainly used all available means to thwart charges made by victims and to

¹Kazuko Tsurumi, *New Lives: Some Case Studies in Minamata* (Tokyo, Japan: Sophia University, 1988), 5–8; "The Dirty Hand of Industry in Southern Japan," *New York Times*, June 8, 1975, 249.

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avoid paying for their polluting ways, a predictable response in almost every political and cultural context of the modern industrial era. But they were also remarkably susceptible to public shaming—in a way that could not be said, certainly, of Union Carbide officials in Bhopal or Hooker Chemical officials in Love Canal, as shown in the other case studies of this book. Japanese courts also showed a resolve and determination to punish corporations for criminal actions once they had become convinced that the corporations were responsible for the contamination. Images of Minamata's suffering, validated by the culture of victimization resulting from the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, dominated the public understanding of the conflict. The Chisso Corporation was clearly identified in the court of public opinion, in addition to the legal system, as the victimizer—and the fishing community as victim.

While the Minamata activists skillfully presented their case to the public, the public by the early 1970s was also prepared to receive their message. Intense activism and press coverage on environmental issues had thrust the problem of pollution into the broader national consciousness by the late 1960s and onto the "to-do" lists of politicians. In 1967, as the Niigata victims filed their mercury poisoning lawsuit, Japan's national government created the "Basic Law for Environmental Pollution Control." In 1970, an extraordinary session of the Japanese Diet passed a series of laws to regulate various types of pollution. Known as the "Pollution Diet," the legislature also made damaging human health with pollution a crime—the first nation to pass such a law.

The Minamata fishermen also benefited from a more general struggle to realize the promise of democratic control in the 1947 constitution. The environment was certainly important to many activists, but they also viewed environmental protection as a key test of Japanese democracy. Much like the issue of civil rights in the United States in the 1960s, environmental justice in Japan became a rallying call for those who pursued a broader agenda of democratization. In the end, the success of the Minamata victims reflected a more general transformation of Japanese individuals from imperial subjects with limited rights to citizens of a constitutional democracy willing and able to confront powerful interests. Marking one significant point of that shift, in 1983 the activist Kawamoto was elected to the city council of Minamata, thus breaking the decades-long stranglehold over city politics by corporate and business interests. Minamata disease had ravaged Kawamoto's body, but it also gave him a political voice.

MINAMATA AS A GLOBAL EVENT

Although Minamata is often thought of as a Japanese tragedy, it also had global implications. Like Chernobyl and Bhopal, the disaster transcended national boundaries, illustrating the physical and imagined connections created by globalization. A Minamata victim and activist, Hamamoto Tsugunori was keenly aware of the tragedy's global significance. In 1972, he took his first trip abroad—to Stockholm to speak to a United Nations environmental conference about Minamata disease. He discovered that mercury poisoning was a global phenomenon. In 1975, he visited Canadian Indians suffering from mercury poisoning caused by a British multinational chemical corporation. He subsequently traveled throughout the world to speak of his experiences and to visit other sufferers of mercury poisoning. In the process, he helped to create a new community of victims that crossed national and ethnic boundaries.

Minamata was also well known in the United States, frequently appearing on the front page of newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. In response to Minamata, Americans at first gave themselves a pat on the back for being far better stewards of their environment than the Japanese, whose industrial successes in the 1970s had begun to eclipse those of the United States. But Americans soon discovered that they shared much more in common with the Japanese fishermen of Minamata than they had assumed. Consumer advocates in the United States, like their counterparts in Japan, began demanding testing for mercury in tuna and swordfish—and in fish from their own territorial waters. Recreational fishermen on Lake St. Clair in the United States and Canada were told they could no longer eat their catch when it was discovered that the waters had been poisoned by mercury. Commercial fisheries on Lake Ontario and the Niagara River were shut down after testing in the mid-1970s revealed high levels of mercury in fish and most have never been reopened. After news of Minamata, regulators of chemical industries in Niagara Falls in the 1970s—who had relied on “self-policing”—discovered that chemical companies were dumping mercury directly into the local waters that fed into Lake Ontario, the main source of drinking water for the Canadian city of Toronto across the border.

The more people around the world tested their food and water supplies for mercury, the more they realized that they, too, might suffer from Minamata disease, a universal rather than Japanese affliction. In

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FIGURE 1.1 Minamata Tomoko is bathed by her mother. (Black Star)

1971, the U.S. Congress held a series of high-profile hearings on cases of mercury poisonings in the United States, an echo across the vast Pacific Ocean of the Minamata controversy. Another expert warned American dieters to limit their consumption of tuna fish sandwiches. More than one a day just might make them go Minamata.

THE APPEAL TO EMOTION

A far more cosmopolitan and integrated global media system also made Minamata a world event. Minamata, like the other tragedies in this book, became an event in modern world history because journalists, editors, and broadcasters paid attention to it. Americans, for example, took intense notice of Minamata in response to a series of photographic essays by the celebrated American photographer W. Eugene Smith. Smith was famous for his extended picture essays in *Life* magazine (then the most popular magazine in the country), including photographs of the bloody American taking of Iwo Jima from Japan during World War II. In 1971, Smith and his young wife of Japanese ancestry chronicled the struggles of the Minamata activists and victims. *Life*, in 1972, ran many of Smith's photos, which

became an instant sensation. Smith displayed his images in dozens of magazines, newspapers, exhibits, and in his own book. One art critic described a famous portrait of a young victim, "her face and hands horribly distorted, being bathed by her mother, who gazes at her with gentle affection; both the pose and the mood of the picture recall the delicate sadness of Michelangelo's *Pieta*."² Smith called the picture "Tomoko in Her Bath," but it was known more widely as the "Minamata *Pieta*." It attained iconic status, subsequently featured in nearly every major newspaper and magazine article about the tragedy, including in Japan, where it fit in perfectly with the culture of victimization.

As in Japan, it was not the scientific evidence that swayed the American public of the mid-1970s, but the artistic presentation of the victims' suffering, referred to once by Smith as "industrial genocide." A *New York Times* reviewer noted in 1975: "[T]he details of an obscure provincial disaster took on the dimensions of high tragedy, and focused attention on the dangers of unrestrained industrialization in a way that no amount of dumb facts could." Smith, said the reviewer, had transformed the Minamata disease victims "into heroic saints and martyrs, and reduced the leaders and agents of a great industrial corporation to the level of villains." Soon, Americans would discover their own Minamata much closer to home in a place called Love Canal. It was a connection that many American consumers of Smith's Minamata imagery had not expected.³

A NEW WAY TO CALCULATE PROGRESS

While awakening many in Japanese society to the possibilities of grassroots activism, Minamata also helped to alter the way many Japanese defined progress. It was a commonplace in all modernizing societies that pollution is the price of progress. In response to Minamata, however, many Japanese adjusted their formula for the future by making a clean environment a precondition of progress. Progress, in other words, required protecting the environment rather than destroying it. It helped, of course, that Japan's economy had been growing at an annual rate of more than 15 percent in the

²"Re-evaluating the Work of W. Eugene Smith," *New York Times*, May 27, 1994, C24.

³"Minamata Victims Transformed," *New York Times*, May 11, 1975, D31.

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1960s, making people believe that a clean environment was perhaps affordable. There is numerical evidence to support this shift in the Japanese conception of progress. Amidst the major pollution compensation trials of the early 1970s, in which Minamata figured prominently, public opinion polls consistently showed that large majorities of Japanese considered a clean environment more important than economic growth. According to national opinion polls in the period 1972–1975, Japanese citizens were willing to accept higher taxes in exchange for a cleaner environment. At least in part due to the Minamata controversy, Japan has taken a lead role in attempting to convince polluting countries to reduce greenhouse emissions. In 1997, Japan convened 160 nations in the city of Kyoto to set guidelines for reducing global emissions.

In June 2008, Shinto Ishihara, the flamboyant governor of the Tokyo region, broke ranks with the prime minister of Japan and decided to impose even more drastic reductions on greenhouse emissions in Japan's capital. Known for his right-wing nationalist views, including the hugely popular book of the 1980s entitled *The Japan that Can Say No*, Ishihara drew on his painful experiences as head of Japan's national environmental agency during the 1970s. At the time, he was at the epicenter of the Minamata mercury poisoning controversy and had supported Chisso. More than 30 years later, he cited the Minamata mercury poisoning as "the kind of tragedy that the government can cause when it fails to act." Ishihara said the main lesson he learned from the disaster was that, "when you try to catch up to developed countries, you end up ignoring environmental issues."⁴

Not only did Minamata cause many Japanese citizens, as well as politicians, to change their definition of "progress," it also allowed for the community to find a sense of closure conspicuously absent in the other case studies of this book. Various parts of Japanese society, including the legal system and public opinion, created a narrative about the tragedy that clearly identified victim and perpetrator. The Chisso Corporation's president, Kenichi Shamada, got down on his knees and apologized to the victims. It is hard to imagine the CEO of Hooker Chemical or Union Carbide, or the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev, prostrating themselves in such a fashion before victims, much less admitting any guilt for the disasters.

⁴"Tokyo Mayor Leads on Climate," *Financial Times*, June 3, 2008, 6.

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Still, despite the positive results, the tragic dimensions of Minamata should not be forgotten. While more than 2,000 survivors received generous compensation and medical care, 10,000 others were denied compensation on the grounds that they could not definitively prove that their illness was caused by Chisso. In 1996, as most of the uncompensated survivors were reaching the end of their lives, they finally gave up their struggle with Chisso and accepted payments of about \$24,000, in exchange for dropping all further legal claims.

In the meantime, the polluted waters at Minamata retain their toxicity. Remediation, the technical term for cleaning up toxic wastes, meant building a 1.3 mile net in 1974 separating the bay from the open sea and dredging and burying on land the recovered, mercury-laced sediments of the bay's seabed. The stated purpose of the net, a sort of underwater fence, was to prevent the contaminated fish from traveling out of the bay, where they might be caught on the open seas by commercial fishing trawlers and consumed. But the real reason for the net had less to do with containing toxic wastes (engineers knew the net was no barrier for mercury-laced water and microbes) than with appeasing Japanese consumers, who feared that fish outside the bay were being contaminated. Moreover, the very process of "remediating" by dredging mercury-laced sediments actually had the paradoxical effect of stirring up the toxins, making them more accessible to seaborne microorganisms. In short, the solution turned out to be something of an illusion and perhaps even more of a problem than the one it supposedly solved. When the dredging was complete, engineers placed a cement and steel barrier—like the sarcophagus at Chernobyl or the clay and polyurethane cover at Love Canal—over the mercury-soaked portions of the seabed that could not be removed and buried in a toxic waste dump on land.

Even when the process was complete, no one was sure that the mercury was safely contained. Perhaps suspecting as much, the authorities have refused to conduct a full epidemiological study that would determine the full scope of health impacts from the mercury poisoning of Minamata Bay, pre- and post- "remediation." Invariably, samplings of sea sediments have revealed alarmingly high rates of mercury, as have periodic samplings of fish (which did not stop the Japanese government in 1997 from declaring fish from the bay safe

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for consumption). In the meantime, Japanese chemical companies, prevented by new regulations and legislation from dumping toxic wastes into Japanese rivers, seas, and oceans, often moved their operations overseas to developing countries such as Indonesia, which lacked such regulations. Japan's new environmental consciousness and regulatory apparatus, it turns out, worked only in Japan, whereas Japan's industrial giants operated throughout the world.

Back home, Minamata, like Love Canal in western New York, became a kind of pariah community, notorious as a symbol of pollution and struggling to find an identity in a postindustrial world. Like Niagara Falls, Minamata was once a thriving industrial city of more than 50,000. Today, most industry has disappeared and the population has shrunk to less than 30,000, mostly older people. Young people leave, often concealing their origins for fear of being labeled "polluted," which would make it very difficult for them to find a job or marriage partner.

Debates continued in Minamata about how, and if, to remember the disaster. Some residents wanted to forget that it had ever happened. A handful of activists—a tiny minority—argued that Minamata should be made a "sacred city," a monument to the violence of toxic waste, just as Hiroshima honored victims of the atomic bomb. A memorial erected in 1996 contained copper plates with the engraved names of the dead hidden inside a copper chest, a reflection of the continuing shame and stigma attached to victims.

The very system of compensation has also had a perverse outcome, making the victims dependent on the perpetrators. The Japanese government continually propped up the Chisso Corporation with cash infusions so that it could continue accepting its burden of shame and paying out money to survivors. Even the few Minamata residents who hadn't died or become permanently disabled and who continued fishing became dependent on Chisso. Because no one would dare eat fish from Minamata, the compensation settlement stipulated that the fishermen should deliver their catch to Chisso, which would then destroy the fish, considered officially edible since 1997, but nonetheless incinerated just in case. Fishing in Minamata had become a form of welfare, a way to support fishermen who, paradoxically, could no longer support themselves by selling their catch. Instead, they caught fish for the toxic-waste incinerator, an illustration of one of the lesser-known and more bizarre results of Japanese modernization.

SOURCES

■ Struggling with the Disease

The following is the story of a victim's thoughts about his quest to deal with the disease. Oiwa Keibo came from a family of Minamata fishermen—the ones most affected since they had a diet made up almost exclusively of seafood from the poisoned bay.

As you study this document, address the following questions: Why did some of the victims refuse to participate in the lawsuit against the Chisso Corporation? How did social and economic pressures divide the victims? How did neighbors look upon Keibo's family? Were they supportive, and why or why not? Why did the victims hide their suffering? Finally, what was Keibo's attitude toward being a victim, and how did that attitude clash with the necessity of playing the role of victim in order to sway public opinion?

In the 1960s, young people abandoned our region in droves to search for employment in urban centers. As televisions and refrigerators flowed in, the labor force flowed out. My family managed to keep fishing even after Father's death, but our need for cash increased. . . . It must have been when I was in primary school that instant ramen⁵ appeared. Until fast foods became popular, we had been delighted just to find a fried egg in our lunch boxes.

As I grew up, I became keenly interested in politics. . . . I felt that if the government had been run properly, something as horrible as the Minamata disease incident would never have occurred. The conservative Liberal Democratic Party was in power. Therefore, emotionally I leaned toward the socialist and communist opposition parties. . . . I intuitively felt that it was not Chisso by itself but society as a whole—the system that dictated the actions of a company like Chisso—that was wrong. I understood full well that the ruling party focused its attention on the growth of such large corporations. This focus is what I wanted to change.

In 1968, the government officially recognized Minamata disease as a condition caused by industrial pollution, and the next year victims filed a class-action suit against the government. Before the suit was

Source: Excerpted from Oiwa Keibo, *Rowing the Eternal Sea: The Story of a Minamata Fisherman*, trans. Karen Colligan-Taylor (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 57–60.

⁵ An instant noodle soup in a container into which hot water is poured.

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filed, my family was faced with the decision of whether or not to participate as plaintiffs. At that time there was only one victims' organization, but it was already divided between those who wanted to file suit and those who didn't. Those who opposed the suit worried that the costs would be so high they would jeopardize family assets, and they were concerned about alienating themselves from their neighbors. . . .

It wasn't that someone influenced me to promote the lawsuit. I reached that decision on my own. . . . I also wanted to strike back at Chisso and to clarify the company's responsibility. . . . I didn't know a thing about trials. But I did know that I had to do something to avenge my father's death. . . .

After Father died, Minamata disease became so prevalent in my family that people began to say it must be a genetic problem. In a remote village like ours, this type of gossip might well have been the product of some long-smoldering envy of a well-established family. . . . Other men in our village had died in much the same way that my father had, but no one was willing to trace the causes of their deaths to Minamata disease. If they had admitted the roots of the problem, as my family had, they in turn would have become the object of village gossip. Some rumors would hold that the disease was genetic, and some would say it was infectious. Through these rumors Minamata disease became a social stigma, which made it difficult for young people to find marriage partners or employment. If families accepted compensation for death or illness, they would be accused of taking Chisso's dirty money. So, families who lost a loved one to Minamata disease would attribute the death to any number of other afflictions. Even the victims themselves must have wanted to believe that they had anything but Minamata disease. . . .

However, as the case progressed and the issue was covered on television and in the press, Chisso's responsibility became a topic of public discussion. As the disease became more socially acceptable, the number of victims applying for certification increased. . . . My mother and brothers would often tell me that nothing we said about Minamata disease could bring my father back to life, so there was no point in discussing it. . . . I must say that among the younger victims there is a tendency to develop a dependent mentality. . . .

Diseases caused by industrial pollution are often viewed simply as tragedies for the victims. But as a Minamata disease patient, I can now say that while this disease is a tragedy, we can also look at it as an ordeal to be overcome. In this sense, Minamata disease victims are no different than other handicapped people. If we define ourselves as victims, we won't get anywhere. Only when we embrace Minamata disease as a condition with which we live will we be able to keep moving forward.

■ Those Who Remain Are Like Embers

The second document is also an excerpt from Keibo's memoir. It describes Keibo's thoughts after achieving seeming victory—the creation of a process whereby victims could be certified and qualify for compensation payments. To the astonishment of fellow Minamata activists, whose efforts he had coordinated, led, and organized for years, Keibo decided to reject the compensation. The move was all the more astounding given his single-minded commitment—including numerous arrests during acts of civil disobedience—to get justice for the victims. He had sacrificed friends and families for the sake of pushing the Minamata issue to the forefront of Japanese society.

Why do you think Keibo ultimately refused compensation? How does he invoke his religious beliefs to justify his rejection of compensation? What do you think he means when he says that compensation is a “ritual”? How does he understand the clash between tradition and modernity? What is his attitude toward the state and how can this attitude be explained? What do you think that Keibo means when he says that there “is an unbridgeable gap between the individual and the system”?

As I look back on the Minamata movement, or at current nuclear-power and dam-construction issues, I always wonder why people give in to money. Why do they settle for compensation funds or “onetime” settlement payments? What does *hosho*, compensation, mean? I have been thinking about this for a long time. I think “compensation” is a concept that entered Japan in the Meiji period, along with other concepts of modernization and Westernization. Earlier, under the oppressive authority structure of feudal Japan, one had no choice but to accept one's lot—or die. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the compensation system had been forced on the people from above. It was one of the citizen's demands in the process of democratization, and it is something we continue to demand today. We have sought out a lifestyle in which everything has a price.

Today almost all workers have been swallowed up by the Establishment, and you seldom hear anyone speak of “class struggle.” You can no longer distinguish the political Right from the Left. As the economy

Source: Excerpted from Oiwa Keibo, *Rowing the Eternal Sea: The Story of a Minamata Fisherman*, trans. Karen Colligan-Taylor (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 153–157.

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grows, demands for compensation will increase both in number and amount. However, as capital plays a greater role in our lives, the place occupied by the soul seems to shrink. This is a situation that we, the people, have created in collaboration with the Establishment.

Of course, the reason we seek compensation is that we feel we cannot get by without it. Perhaps it has become a rite of passage, concluding an event. When a person dies, we hold a wake and a funeral, followed by seventh-day, forty-ninth day, and one-year Buddhist memorial services. Perhaps compensation is also a ritual. In this sense it does have meaning. . . .

The question still remains, however, as to why no one went one step farther, why no one kicked in the wall of the system, exclaiming, "This isn't about money!" There are some who received payment and then said, "This isn't about money." But how can you extract yourself from the system once you have been paid off?

Probably those who receive compensation, especially those who had been in the vanguard of the movement, sensed that as long as they held to the line that they were not after money, they would be exposing themselves to extreme suffering. They must have realized what would lie ahead: expulsion from society, isolation, and ultimately insanity. I understand this only too well from my own experience. Because they could foresee this fate, they chose to accept the money and withdraw their feelings into the inner recesses of their hearts. Who am I to censure their actions?

Therefore, rather than seeing the victims "taking money," I see them as withdrawing. After waiting patiently for years in the most difficult conditions and enduring all the accusations surrounding their motives, they found themselves accepting a final settlement. . . . We need to let go and return to the lives of ordinary people. If I think about those who accepted the final payment in this way, it all makes sense. . . .

There's no need for anyone to feel guilty about receiving a sum of money that would barely purchase a car. They should think of the money as "travel expenses." . . .

In the past when I used expressions like "the Chisso within us" and "the state is but another expression for ourselves," people challenged me with the question, "Does that mean, then, that you have forgiven your enemies?" Naturally, it's not easy to forgive one's enemies. For those whose very existences are determined in relation to their enemies, to lose their enemies would be to lose their own identities. That's a terrifying prospect. When I applied for certification I was not yet aware of this. I was still young. But I did not forgive the authorities. I simply threw them out of my life. I don't find the state valuable enough to want to keep on pursuing it. The state makes no attempt to assume responsibility

and, in fact, is incapable of doing so. It gives you some kind of glib response, but that's not what the patients want to hear. What they want is compassion—someone to share their pain. There is an unbridgeable gap between the individual and the system. You must place your trust in one side or the other. I place my trust in the individual.

When I withdrew my application for certification, there were those who criticized me, saying, "All you are doing is satisfying the state and the company." I certainly don't see it that way. I acted to divorce myself from the state. There are still people who, as long as they live, will never say, "It's over." These people cannot be judged by the standards of the Establishment. The system is at a loss as to how to deal with them. They don't put their trust in the state but in themselves. This is also a form of resistance. . . .

Traditional peoples have been cast aside and marginalized the world over. Their numbers may be few, but their existence has become ever more meaningful. Those who remain are like embers. . . . When the system tells me, "It's all over. The fire is out," I want to be right here to declare, "No. Here are the embers. I've kept them glowing."

■ The Confrontation at Goi

The story of the Minamata victims, also reflected in the stories of many other victims of large-scale disasters, conveys a simple but profound point: Empowerment comes through struggle and sacrifice. The Chisso Corporation did not simply decide at a certain point to admit its guilt and provide compensation. It was forced to do so—and only after a long and bitter struggle. The following description is of an incident on January 7, 1972—before the Chisso Corporation finally agreed to settle a lawsuit brought by Minamata victims. The eyewitness, the American journalist W. Eugene Smith mentioned earlier, was severely beaten by Chisso Corporation employees during an attempt by Minamata patients—led by the victim activist Kawamoto—to arrange a meeting with company management in the city of Goi. As a result of the beating, Smith suffered permanent and severe damage to his vision.

Do you think the beating of the Minamata patients would have been noticed if an American journalist had not been injured? Why

Source: Excerpted from W. Eugene Smith and Aileen M. Smith, *Minamata* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), 94–98.

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was he apparently singled out for a brutal beating? Why do you think the union members at Goi sided with Chisso and participated in the violence against the Minamata victims? Do you think the company's use of violence aided or detracted from the company's attempt to avoid responsibility for Minamata disease? Why do you think the company acted the way it did? How did the protestors use Buddhist religious rituals to advance their cause against the Chisso Corporation? Why do think they did so? How did publicity surrounding the incident affect public opinion?

January 7, 1972, is a day that will long endure in my mind.

It started with Kawamoto's group traveling an hour and a half to Chisso's plant at Goi to keep an appointment. It ended with patients being mauled and me being seriously injured. My equipment was destroyed.

Chisso had ordered union members from Goi to serve strong-arm duty in front of their Tokyo offices. Kawamoto considered this wrong and made an appointment with the head of the labor union to discuss why a supposedly free union was providing manpower for this company-ordered anti-patient action.

Patients, supporters, and newsmen arrived at the gates of the Goi factory at the appointed hour. A runaround began. . . . A newsman demanding to use a telephone to meet a deadline suddenly vaulted the iron gate. The patients' supporters, triggered by this, rushed forward. . . . I photographed Kawamoto through the open gate; he was hunched slightly, as usual, talking to the guards, his hands in his pockets, and I laughed at this "riot" scene. He and his followers took a leisurely walk into the gatehouse. . . . A guard invited me to have a chair. I thanked him. . . .

I was relieved and pleased that a dangerous situation seemed to be under control. . . . yet I had been aware of the black company cars moving slowly by, surveying the scene, and of guards making frequent trips deeper into the factory for exchanges with men in work uniforms. I was uneasy.

Suddenly, a mob of workers rounded a factory building to converge on the gatehouse. I made a dash for the building, thinking of my wife, not of news. The mob pinned us in. A man started barking orders. I guessed (correctly) that he had been a sergeant in the Imperial Army. . . . They hit. They hit me hardest, among the first. After my cameras, perhaps. The last exposure, bad, blurred, shows the man on the left, his foot at that moment finishing with my groin, reaching my

cameras. The man on the right was aiming for my stomach. Then four men raked me across an upturned chair and thrust me into the hands of six who lifted me and slammed my head against the concrete outside, the way you would kill a rattlesnake if you had him by the tail. . . .

Chisso had set us up—they, by damn, were going to intimidate patients and take care of that foreign journalist. . . .

They made a serious mistake. The beating of a respected American journalist loosed an avalanche of unfavorable publicity upon Chisso, and it gave increased respectability to Kawamoto and the Minamata cause: if Chisso were really like this, people said, maybe the patients were right. If I had to suffer the injury, I took consolation in the fact that it increased nationwide sympathy for the patients.

Chisso issued a written statement immediately after the incident: I had become hysterical and injured myself. . . . Chisso offered a statement of “regret,” and offered to pay medical fees without admitting responsibility, if we would withdraw legal charges filed with policies. I said I wanted their lies corrected publicly. . . . They retracted nothing, they admitted nothing. The company’s behavior gave me an intimate look at the frustration the patients had endured for years. I decided not to sue. I could not be both plaintiff and journalist.

In January, after the Goi incident, Chisso put up the bars that made a fortress of their office. Kawamoto . . . invented ways of rattling the gates, so to speak, such as bringing in a makeshift altar and a Buddhist priest to intone prayers for the victims, or gathering victims and supporters to bullhorn demands . . . through corridors. Occasionally there would be a brief dialogue with a Chisso manager on the other side of the bars. Once, the patients sawed for hours, cutting two or three small bars by hand. They knew, of course, it would get them nowhere. It was strictly psychological, just to say, “Remember, we are still here.”

■ “Let a Feather Drop Onto Their Heads. . . .”: The Chisso Corporation Defends Itself

The Chisso Corporation dealt with the Minamata problem with a combination of carrots and sticks. Initially, in 1959, it offered “sympathy” payments to victims, token sums that did not require that the company actually admit guilt or stop its dumping into Minamata Bay.

Source: Excerpted from interview with Chisso Corporation spokesperson Keiji Higashidaira, reprinted in Akio Mishima, *Bitter Sea: The Human Cost of Minamata Disease*, trans. Richard L. Gage and Susan B. Murata (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1992), 151–153.

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At least through the 1950s and much of the 1960s, it could also count on sympathetic press coverage that constantly challenged the legitimacy and even sanity of the Minamata victims. But after the emergence of a more active civil society in Japan, public opinion began to shift, and Chisso hardened its approach. As noted in the previous document, it sometimes resorted to violence, which supplemented its strategy of stonewalling and hiring scientists to “prove” that links between its industrial wastes and Minamata disease were “inconclusive.” Journalistic attitudes, however, were changing since the more conservative 1950s. The popular weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun* on July 12, 1971, published a Japanese translation of an interview conducted by a company spokesperson with a Swedish journalist. When the company learned that the interview was to be published, it attempted, with some success, to buy up all copies of the edition of the magazine as it hit the newsstands. But not all of them were bought, and the Minamata activists reprinted the interview in leaflets that were broadly published. The incident is a powerful illustration of the key role of communications media in technological disasters. The media can support existing power structures and suppress those who challenge them, but on occasion it can also promote a change in power relationships.

How does the spokesperson attack the legitimacy of the Minamata disease activists? What is his explanation for Minamata disease? What class arguments does he advance in defense of the company? Who, according to the spokesperson, are the real victims of the court battle waged by disease sufferers for compensation? Do you think the spokesperson actually believed what he said about Minamata disease? Why do you think publication of this interview was so damaging for the Chisso Corporation?

Q: Didn't you think at all of the danger of using mercury?

Higashidaira: No, we never tested the mercury to find out if it was poisonous. We knew that the twenty-four other manufacturers of vinyl chlorides had been discharging untreated wastes for a long time with no obvious ill effects. Who would have thought Minamata would be the first case of pollution? We had done everything we thought necessary. It never occurred to us that our effluent was dangerous to humans.

Q: Yet you continued pouring effluent into Minamata Bay even after 1957, when you had some idea that mercury was the cause?

Higashidaira: There was no solid proof. . . .

Q: But you acknowledge now that the mercury in Chisso's effluent is the cause of Minamata disease.

Higashidaira: There may be a connection. . . . For all we know, part of the cause may be some other poisonous substance. There may be something emanating from some other place.

Q: Is there another plant nearby?

Higashidaira: No. But since we plan to go into this issue in detail in the trial now underway, I can't comment further.

Q: Do you have proof that Chisso is innocent?

Higashidaira: Of course. . . . [but] I can't, of course, give you any details right now.

Q: Are the Minamata fishers still eating fish from Minamata Bay?

Higashidaira: Yes, and that's an important point. To put it bluntly, they've been eating rotten fish that were floating in the bay. But it's difficult to make this point in court, since it would look as if we were trying to create a bad impression of our opponents. As if they were animals, you know. Those who became sick after 1958, at any rate, should be grateful that they're receiving compensation.

Q: Do you think that thirty thousand yen for each child afflicted was sufficient compensation in 1959?

Higashidaira: Yes, certainly, given the value of that amount of money at the time. The families were very glad to get the money. . . . We've done everything we can. If the victims hadn't been so poor, they probably would have gotten more money. In Japan, compensation is based on income. The Minamata fishers were barely able to earn enough to eat every day, and their prospects were quite limited. . . . In Minamata the victims were almost all old people and children.

Q: For twenty-five years Chisso spent no money on treating its wastes. You must have channeled all the money you saved into production.

Higashidaira: About fifty-fifty. The patients have cost us a considerable sum, you know.

Q: What do you think of the state of pollution in Japan?

Higashidaira: The Japanese newspapers tend to make too much of a fuss over the issue. Let a feather drop onto their heads and they'll claim it was a whole bird. As for Minamata disease, that's an issue strictly between Chisso and the patients. It's a problem of the past and has nothing to do with current issues.

Q: What do you think of the trial?

Higashidaira: Both the city and the prefecture oppose the trial. We've been forced into court. We'd prefer to solve the problem

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out of court, in a friendly fashion, but they won't listen. Ninety percent of Minamata residents favor mediation. It's just a few who are creating a fuss. Only a hundred fifty people turn out for their demonstrations. Most citizens want to change the city's name. Some citizens get together spontaneously and hold meetings in support of Chisso.

Q: I believe there is a growing anti-pollution movement in Minamata.

Higashidaira: They're just trying to fan the hatred. Someone's out to agitate people. It wasn't so bad at first, but now it's become a witch hunt. The patients and their families come to us making demands, and sometimes a Buddhist priest stands outside the gate intoning a sutra of mourning. It's creepy.

Q: Would you feel the same about the way the company has handled the issue if your daughter had been one of the victims?

Higashidaira: I can't even imagine that possibility.