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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

The Homeless in Japan

Directed by Luc Cote
Bullfrog Films (1999: 26 minutes)
Transcribed by Darrell Moen

Narration: My name is Tsuyoshi Inaba and I'm 29 years old. I'm fighting for the rights and living conditions of the homeless. I live in Tokyo, Japan.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: How are you doing?

Unidentified homeless: I'm fine.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: You've been here pretty long, haven't you?

Unidentified homeless: Not, not really.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: You look familiar to me.

Narration: I think there are two ways of reacting to the homeless. One is to turn away and avoid them as if you didn't see anything. The other is to work on changing the reality you see. Personally, I want to change things. I want to change what I see. On the streets, the homeless and the poor are treated like garbage. Some are even killed. Individual lives are being wrecked. I want to change this situation. That's why I've become an activist.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Are you all right? Do you have a cold?

Unidentified homeless: Yes, I have a cold.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: He looks really cold out here like this.

Narration: Japan is not like Europe or America. There are no shelters for the homeless. Often, people have nowhere to go. Homeless people are not sleeping in the streets because they like it. They simply have no choice.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Did you get over your cold?

Unidentified homeless: No, not yet.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Try to get some rest. Do you still have some medicine?

Unidentified homeless: No, I don't have any medicine.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: None at all? Well, I'll pick some up and come back later.

Unidentified homeless: Okay.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: When was it when I met you for the first time, Ms. Ayako?

Ms. Ayako: It was last year.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Take care and be strong. I'm sure next year will be better for you. I'll come by from time to time to see how you're doing.

Narration: Right now, there are nearly 6,000 homeless people in Tokyo. Most of them used to work in construction as day laborers, but now they can't find work. Many came to Tokyo 20 or so years ago when the country's economy was booming.

Today, we see not only the day laborers, but also skilled professionals like carpenters and white-collar workers who are forced to sleep outside [due to the economic downturn].

Tsuyoshi Inaba: How many of you are filling out this form for the first time--could I have a show of hands? You'll be asked where you're from--your place of permanent residence. So don't write Shinjuku, write down your place of birth.

Narration: There is no minimum age to be eligible for public support according to the Law on Livelihood Protection. But in fact, public servants apply an age limit. You have to be at least 65 years old to get welfare. If you're in your 50s or early 60s, you get nothing at all. And yet the average age of people who sleep outside in Tokyo is 55.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: We're going to the Shinjuku government office building shortly. When they ask you what your problem is, please explain in your own words any medical problems you're experiencing. I'm afraid it'll take about 20 minutes to walk to the Welfare Office from here.

Narration: For the past four years I've been going to the social welfare office once a week with the homeless, with people who need to go to a hospital, or with old people who need the livelihood protection allowance.

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Some officers tend to be rude and unkind. But remember, like any other citizen you have the basic right to a medical examination and to social welfare. Please do your best. [Well, here you go.] The office is on the left side at the end of the corridor.

Narration: I am always keeping an eye on the counter to see that the homeless are treated well. If things were normal [and civil], I wouldn't have to do this. But because welfare officers still discriminate against the homeless, we have to do this. That's just the way things are for now. I place where I do most of my work is Shinjuku, which is called the sub center of Tokyo or the new center of Tokyo. Tokyo is probably the busiest city in the world. Millions of people go through the Shinjuku subway and railway station everyday, commuting to work or university, or just to hang out.

About 200 homeless people used to live here, in the station, in homes made of cardboard boxes. There were cardboard houses lined up in a row right along here. It used to be called "Cardboard Village".

In February 1994, the Tokyo Metropolitan Administration used force to get the "Cardboard Village" out of the station. The homeless were kicked out [into the street].

Loudspeaker announcement: People in this area, take your belongings and leave now.

Narration: Some people froze to death after being kicked out of the underground passage area. At the time, I was part of another group of activists. We all talked about this incident. Every one of us felt that this was horrible. We said, "Our taxes are being used to kill homeless people. We have to put an end to this." So we started our support group here in Shinjuku.

Tsuyoshi Inaba (*speaking at Shinjuku Station using hand mike*): We (in the support group) want to work with you to combine our strength to resist this eviction.

Narration: Later, the homeless set up another cardboard village in the underground passage area of Shinjuku Station and began living there. But city officials and police decided to throw them out again. And again, they tried to stand up for their rights. This happened several times. In the end, the homeless squatted and refused to move. Many of them were there to protest and defend their rights, but we ended up being scattered by the police.

Homeless chanting: Leave us alone! Go away!

Narration: Three members of my group were arrested and two were prosecuted. They were detained [without trial] for nine months. Now, we are holding talks with the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, trying to solve the problem together.

Tsuyoshi Inaba (*addressing a crowd using a hand mike*): Let's fight city hall!
Let's fight the Shinjuku Welfare office!

Narration: The purpose of our group is to reform the current administration so that it starts providing homeless people adequate social welfare and job opportunities. The homeless are fighting for change and we support their struggle.

I don't make any money working with the homeless. I earn my living teaching in a private school. I was born in Hiroshima and grew up there. When my mother was just ten years old, she witnessed the atomic bombing. She saw the mushroom cloud from a suburb outside Hiroshima.

Tsuyoshi Inaba's mother: I went to Hiroshima to look for my family. I saw a lot of corpses there that were still hanging from stakes. War is really horrible [when you experience it firsthand. When I hear the story of the atomic bombing, I can still smell it. I don't know what smell it is exactly, but I feel pain in my stomach.

Narration: Ever since I was a kid, I grew up listening to the story of the war and the A-bomb from my grandfather and my mother. It always made me think that it's not the total number of victims that counts, but each individual life that's lost. And those precious individual stories that were taken away forever. During the New Year's holidays, we set up a tent in a park near Shinjuku Station and ask a few doctors and nurses to come by. We set up a temporary clinic. We meet here every day from December 27th to January 3rd. We do this because all public offices are closed during the holidays. So during this period, the homeless are completely abandoned on the streets by both society and government. At times like this we say, "Come together to support each other and survive."

Tsuyoshi Inaba: Does anyone know this place called "Jab Jab"? Then could the two of you lead the way?

Narration: Winters in Tokyo are quite cold. Sometimes it snows and the temperature drops below zero degrees Celsius. Under circumstances like this, a lot of people slip and fall on the streets; some even freeze to death. So we do the rounds at night to make sure that people don't die on the streets. We give out blankets and heating pads when they are needed. We often say, "One person can't make it alone but if we all work together, we'll make it."

The homeless from Shinjuku and the day laborers from the Sanya district often cook for each other. They prepare over 1,300 meals collectively and do all the cooking themselves. This kind of activity is held not only during the holidays but every Sunday throughout the year. Rice is bought thanks to money from donations. The vegetables are the leftovers from supermarkets or unsold produce from nearby farms.

During the New Year's holiday season, most Japanese return to their hometowns and villages and spend time with their extended families. But for the homeless, the holidays are a lonely time.

Unidentified homeless: I haven't gone home in seven years. From my tent, I simply bow in the direction of my hometown. I'm worried about how they're doing back there, but that's all I can do.

Unidentified homeless: If I said I didn't think about my family, of course it would be a lie. I have to force myself to try to not think about them.

Unidentified homeless: I imagine they're wondering about me. But it's not helpful to despair. So I just try to keep a smile on my face; that's about all I can do. My face is smiling, but my heart is crying.

Tsuyoshi Inaba (*addressing New Year's Eve gathering using a hand mike*):

Everyone has come here today to make New Year's sticky rice cakes and celebrate New Year together. We're assembled to give each other strength and work together to enjoy ourselves on this day. All of us taking turns to make mochi together, cooperating with each other and lending our strength--that kind of unity of purpose is needed for anything. Let's always work together for the common good.

Narration: Someone in that tent had difficulty breathing. It started this morning. A doctor came to see him and told us to call the hospital if his condition got worse. It did, so we called an ambulance and he's being taken to the hospital. They wouldn't take him into the hospital saying that he wasn't ill enough to be admitted.

As long as I'm involved in these activities, I'll never think of it as self-sacrificing. I get involved because I like to. If ever I felt like I was sacrificing myself, it would be time for me to stop. I want to get the message across that the homeless are not just part of a category labeled "homeless people". None of them can simply be called a homeless person. Each one of them has a name and a life. I want people to see the homeless as survivors, individuals who are worthy of respect. It's a challenge for me too--respecting each individual's dignity as a fellow human being.