

# Kamagasaki

## The Underside of Japan's Economic Miracle

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THE SUMMER OF 1993 brought world attention to the island nation of Japan. The royal wedding of Crown Prince Hiro Naruhito and Owada Masako entranced the entire globe with a sense of ritual and tradition, mixed with searching questions about the role of women in the male-dominated, Japanese society. Then ritual and splendor gave way to the G7 economic summit in Tokyo with its show of world leaders and hopes of economic agreements. Most dramatically, Japan unveiled an unprecedented change in its political system, as the long-dominant Liberal Democratic Party collapsed under years of political corruption to give rise to a coalition of younger politicians eager to continue riding Japan's wave of economic power.

Yet behind the impressive gains of post-war Japan, another side of Japan's dominance in the global economy festers in the heart of its major cities—the plight of thousands of day laborers. These men, and a few women, are those displaced by economic growth and disgraced in a society where family and company supposedly provide for the security of all.

In the spring of 1992, while visiting Japan to research family planning issues, I had a chance to visit the Kamagasaki area of Osaka, Japan's second largest city and a major center of its industrial and economic power. As I walk out of the train station, I am met by my guide for the afternoon, Sister Sharon Tenbarge, Daughters of Charity. She is the only American working in the area. I

immediately sense that this is an area of the city rarely visited by tourists. In the next few hours I will see a part of Japan I would never have known existed—a city within a city. In the Kamagasaki area of .62 kilometers, 25,000 to 30,000 men survive as day laborers. Mostly middle-aged, these men contract their labor for whatever jobs are available each day, primarily construction work for the ever expanding economic base in Osaka. The beauty of the cherry blossoms which I saw dancing in the afternoon breeze a train stop away contrasts sharply with the grim reality of Kamagasaki.

Kamagasaki is the largest of four day-labor areas in Japan. The others are Sanya in Tokyo, Kotobuki in Yokohama, and Sasajima in Nagoya. Originally established in 1903 as a workers' area mainly for immigrant workers, Kamagasaki today is a living city for Japanese men who in their younger days worked in mining, farming, and on the docks of Osaka. As they lost their places in these industries to younger men and modern technology, the *yoseba* or system of day labor became the regimen of their daily lives.

By five or six o'clock in the morning, the men arrive at the labor center, renamed *Airin* (love and charity) by the municipal government. There they are met by job brokers who hire the men for the day and deliver them to job sites in minivans at a cost of about 25% of the men's daily wage. Jobs are not that plentiful, and by mid-morning the strongest and healthiest are already at

their sites. By early afternoon those left behind are milling around, some already drunk on cheap alcohol, others sitting in the one municipal park, Sankuko, still open to free entry. The other three parks in the area have been fenced off and now require an entrance fee.

The park is the area's social center. On this warm, spring afternoon, men gather in groups of two or three for friendship along with a drink. Gambling, although discreet, is one way for the men to pass their time and part with their wages. A table appears, look-outs are stationed, bets are made. When an occasional police officer wanders by, a signal is given, the table is folded, and the men disperse and resort to conversation, quarreling, and a few fights. Some police are paid to look the other way as their response to the economic powerlessness here. For female "companionship" in this "city of single men," the city's red-light district is close by.

The *yakuza*, Japan's version of organized crime, controls the market for labor as well as much of the gambling, alcohol, drugs, and prostitution in the area. In addition, since workers must pay ten days' rent in advance to secure a room in a *doya* or rooming establishment, many of them are forced to resort to loan sharks, also controlled by the *yakuza*. For others, who have already spent their wages on alcohol or prostitution, the only alternative is the street.

Homelessness remains a constant issue in Kamagasaki. Most workers sleep in a small but protected room. The *doya* were small enough in the postwar period, and the price for a room for the night was correspondingly small. But with the economic growth of the late 1960s and 1970s, new, larger concrete buildings went up and so did the price for an evening's lodging. Those who could no longer do the day's hard work found little money for the increased prices. Mostly older and in poor health, they find them-

selves in the streets for the night with little chance of obtaining work the next day.

Japan has an extensive safety net of social services for most workers. However, these services do not cover day laborers. Often rejected by or rejecting family members, these men are cut off without ties in a nation where one's very identity is intimately tied to the family structure. Their segregation into one area of the city deepens their alienation. It exiles them in an island amidst a prosperous city in this island nation, an "island" rarely seen by Japanese or foreign tourists.

We spend that afternoon walking the streets of the area and talking with some of the men who recognize Sister Sharon. They ask for money or share a story of the day. We visit some of the social service agencies operated by several Christian organizations, particularly Lutheran and Catholic, under the umbrella of the Christian *Kyōyūki*, the Ecumenical Association for Cooperation and Friendship. Through the networks of soup kitchens, children's center (there are some children in the Kamagasaki), clothing center (run by Sister Sharon and several Japanese sisters of the Daughters of Charity), night hostels and other works, the men of the area find food, clothing, shelter and most of all a kind word to sustain them. The city too provides feeding stations for those unable to get a sufficient day's wage to buy food in the many small, local restaurants.

In the early evening we enter the Association's "rooming house" for those unable to find a night's lodging. Crammed tightly together with little room even to turn over, the men, in their late 50's and older, talk quietly on their mats on the floor. It is truly amazing how many people can be held in one large room stretching from one side of the building to the other. Two other floors provide similar arrangements. The men are polite, with a question for Sister Sharon, a wan smile and nod, a comment or two. These men seem comfortable with one

another and with Sister Sharon, thankful to have a place for the night.

Our last stop on my "tour" of Kamagasaki brings us to the Jesuit Social Center, *Tabiji no Sato*, where Jesuit priest Susukida Noboru offers some of the young men of Kamagasaki a refuge from the alcoholism, drugs, gambling, and prostitution which forms part of the Kamagasaki culture of despondency. Father Susukida provides stability and the foundations of community for the eight or nine young men who live there. In addition, the Center engages in social analysis of the situation of day laborers. Through seminars, classes, and a publication, the Center offers a perspective, most often neglected, on this underside of Japan's economic miracle.

The reports published by Father Susukida and his colleagues document a long, troubling history of labor oppression beginning in 1903 when the Fifth Internal Business Exhibition was planned for nearby Tennō-ji. Emperor Meiji was scheduled to visit the site. However, because viewing the homeless and poor would have defiled the Emperor, the local government used the police and military to forcibly move some 10,000 homeless and day laborers out of the Emperor's sight. Their new home was Kamagasaki. Today, "home" means either a room in the newer, large hotels which offer air conditioning at twice the price of the doyas, a smaller room in the doyas themselves, or a spot on the streets, which proves lethal at times. In 1987, 172 men died during the winter nights, and 106 of those were not identifiable. In the first three months of 1991 alone, 44 men froze to death on the street. Back in the park I notice that the bark has been torn off the few remaining trees as firewood for those cold nights.

Although most of the men of Kamagasaki are now Japanese, large numbers of immigrants live there also. The immigrants are subject not only to the alienation and oppression

experienced by others in Kamagasaki but also to the injustices and vagaries of Japanese immigration law. Migrant workers who come to Japan and end up in the day laborer centers performing unskilled work cannot obtain "working permission" from the authorities, and as a result are listed as illegal immigrants. They have no rights to bail, legal counsel, and are not notified of their right to remain silent. Because of their weak legal position, immigrant workers are subject to even greater exploitation by bosses, yakuza and others.

In response to the particular problems of immigrant workers in Kamagasaki, the Christian Kyōyūki formed Asian Friends in 1988, to provide relief work for Asian migrants and to strengthen the position of unskilled migrant labor under Japanese immigration law. The organization publishes a newsletter and works closely with similar organizations in the other day labor camps.

For all the workers of Kamagasaki, conditions of life are perilous. Nutritious meals are hard to come by. Pubs outnumber restaurants. Yet the restaurants furnish the main source of food other than soup kitchens since workers cannot cook in their rooming establishments. Fully one-tenth of the workers have tuberculosis, and age takes its toll on the men. While the average age of Kamagasaki workers was 35 in 1965, now it is 51. Some 60% of the workers are in their 50's and 60's. Yet workers over 50 are seldom given job opportunities at the labor area. Finally, already subject to so much deprivation, the workers often find themselves the objects of street crime or are taunted and even injured by children who throw firecrackers or fire air-guns at the men.

Meanwhile, the police have set up sixteen monitoring cameras, ostensibly to prevent street crime and attacks upon the workers. However, one wonders just who is being watched since no arrests were ever made,

according to the Jesuit Social Center's 1990 report. Police collusion in gambling and other activities in Kamagasaki is well-known to the workers who experience the police as an occupying force. The alienation, frustration, and oppression which have built up over the years, exploded into a violent uprising in Kamagasaki from October 2-6, 1990. The workers were joined by young people from outside the Kamagasaki area sympathetic to the injustices among the workers. As workers and riot police fought in the streets, stores, residences, and the local train station were destroyed in the uprising.

Walking through the streets of Kamagasaki, I notice that the train station has been repaired, and stores are back in business. However, the system of exploitation which binds the workers of Kamagasaki has changed little. Yet these men exhibit a sense of their own individual dignity and community in shared suffering. And as I talk with the pastors, ministers, and helpers from the Christian Kyōyūki, the conversation is not about evangelization or conversion, but rather about caring support, social analysis, and advocacy for improved conditions.

Asian Friends and Father Susukida's Social Center, for example, give voice to these voiceless men.

Out of a sense of the dignity of the people of Kamagasaki as well as a warning from Sister Sharon for my own safety, I take no pictures during my stay in Kamagasaki. However as I leave Sister Sharon and enter the train station, many "pictures" of Kamagasaki are etched in my memory. And I take away with me the words of Father Susukida: "The further you go into the problem of Kamagasaki, the more you find it difficult to solve. One cannot help feeling powerless as it becomes more apparent that it is always human beings who are simply ignored in the shadow of economic prosperity." Yet Father Susukida ends with a word of hope "that the voice of the Christian Kyōyūki calling for 'the humane treatment of human beings' will reach more people and become a starter to develop a national-level social movement." His words echo across the Pacific in America's own national crisis of increasing poverty and powerlessness. Kamagasaki is a clear witness to the "underside" of economic prosperity.