



A LIFESTYLE ATTITUDE

German Heidemarie Schermer literally gave away all her possessions to live without money. Does the director explore all the critical issues? asks CHULEENAN SVETVILAS.

What if this woman had been poorly dressed or visibly dirty?



LIVING WITHOUT MONEY

Director Line Halvorsen, Norway, <http://livingwithoutmoney.org>

A portrait of Heidemarie Schermer, a 68-year-old German woman who gave away all her possessions in 1996, moved out of her apartment, and began an experiment in living without money, which continues to this day. The film explores how she is able to live by sharing, giving and helping others.

The very idea of living without money is a startling one, especially in the contemporary Western world where monetary transactions are an integral part of everyday life. We live in a world where nearly anything and everything can be bought and sold. But Heidemarie Schermer sought an alternative and decided she wanted to simplify her life. So in 1996 she literally gave away all her possessions, moved out of her apartment, and began her experiment in living without money.

In *Living Without Money*, director Line Halvorsen follows the 68-year-old German woman as she travels from one home to another, gives talks to various groups about her way of life and participates in radio and television interviews. One of the documentary's early scenes shows Schermer, an

attractive grandmother with snow-white hair, talking to a roomful of students in Turin, Italy. Several admiring students stand up and tell her that they were impressed and thought she was courageous. Then the film cuts to a moment after the talk is over and one student offers these parting words: "I had a negative impression. She believes she lives without money. But in fact she's living off of other people."

This provocative comment calls into question whether Schermer is leading a bold life of carefree adventure or simply taking advantage of other people's generosity. Putting this scene near the beginning of the film, prods viewers to decide what they think about her chosen lifestyle. This dialectic is present throughout the film.

We see Schermer on a train and wonder: How did she get a train ticket? How does she find a place to stay? Later the film reveals that when she is invited to speak somewhere, they pay for her ticket. She does admit that sometimes she needs money when she travels so she will spend money. Clearly, her idea of living without it is more of a lifestyle attitude: to give, share, help one another, and live within your means.

The documentary shows Schermer, always well dressed, as someone who seems quite happy with her life. One would never think: this is a woman without a home. At one point, she tells a storekeeper that she is "free and stress free." Indeed for two-thirds of the film she maintains a relentlessly positive attitude and appears to

be living a charmed life. She has a seemingly unshakable belief in her way of living.

People invite her to live with them and in exchange she does some work for them, such as cleaning the house. The film makes it clear that the people she stays with are pleased to have her live with them. Some are people she has visited repeatedly over many years. They are inspired by her or want to try her way of life temporarily with Schermer as their guide.

The film includes scenes in which she accompanies people who are attempting to live for a week without money. As when she is with a youth group that boldly asks a grocer if he will accept a pencil for something. He readily offers them a pear and a plum. Later in the film, we see a few women ask a grocer for surplus bread and offer to do some work for him in exchange. He agrees to give them bread. These scenes are fascinating to watch but they make it appear that it is easy to live without money. There were no hostile responses to their requests.

But what if this woman had been poorly dressed or visibly dirty? What if the people asking for things were African immigrants, not German women? I doubt they would have received the same response. These issues are not explored in the film. (Also, what about the influence of the camera on the storeowners' decision to give them something?)

To her credit, Schermer is well aware of her unique position as someone without a permanent home but who always has a place to sleep. She rightly points out

that people cannot compare her to other homeless people. After all, as a well-known figure, strangers are open to having her as a guest in their home. Also she has an advantage as an older woman, it would be difficult to say no to her.

The film is on Schermer's side and is very respectful of her. It is only toward the end of the film that we see some tension. She admits that television appearances make her very nervous. "Often I cry the night before," says Schermer, "because my nerves can't take it. It's a fear of being disgraced." In one of the final scenes, Schermer makes an appearance on an Italian television show. The host, an attractive blond, asks her questions in a slightly mocking tone. At one point in the interview Schermer is having difficulty answering the questions and then apologizes. Apparently things deteriorated after that but we don't see what happened. Instead, the film cuts to Schermer standing in the hall after the interview is over, saying: "Everything disappeared, I couldn't hear anything. I'd never done this simultaneous interpretation before." It's the only moment in the film where Schermer is genuinely out of sorts.

There is no dramatic story arc in *Living Without Money*. It is the story of how one strong woman is able to stay true to her beliefs and how she tries to spread the idea of sharing and giving in lieu of money. A useful idea in a poor economy.

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