

30 Jul 1948

IMPRESSIONS OF THE BERLIN-NEUKÖLLN IVSP WORK-CAMP

Every few minutes - how few, I can't exactly say - a plane takes off from the nearby Tempelhof airport, leaps into view over the tops of the shattered tenements of Neukölln and roars dramatically out of sight, scurrying back to the British Zone for another load of supplies for Berlin. Silence rushes in once again, broken only by the tapping of the hammers as they chip away, cleaning bricks. Ten days the camp has been running, and already 17.000 bricks have been salvaged, cleaned and stacked, in addition to more than the cubic yards of sand; these will be used to build the foundation of the YWCA Neighbourhood Centre - the next job to be tackled as soon as the small square of razed buildings on which the group is at present working, has been levelled to make a playground for the children here.

Neukölln is reputed to have a higher percentage of children than any other Berlin quarter. They really co-operate in the work - they can carry bricks and throw the rubble through the sieves; in return they get free rides in the wheel-barrows. They are bare-foot, sunburnt, and very chubby. Some of them even venture up to the top storey of the building, where the camp lives, and where the "sisters" struggle with an impossibly smoky fire, and try to prepare the meals on time, for the 25 members of the camp - German, American, Danish and British volunteers.

Evening discussions and sings-songs end in the homely glow of one of the precious candles, and the sense of fellowship is deepened by the dramatic symbolism of this group, quietly constructing a little cell of peace-builders, whilst outside, the power and might of the air force roars away into the night. Already the local authorities have recognised the value of the work which the group are doing, for they have offered to let us all take free hot shower-baths every day after work. This concession is a very real one at this time, when every pfennig is urgently required by the administration which has lost all money in the currency reform.

Regularly every day a tired and dirty group makes its way to the baths; and equally regularly the children are waiting to accompany us. They just love Trotting alongside. And they particularly like being with Bill, the leader of the camp - and it is not the novelty of his brown skin, nor even only the flash of his white teeth as he smiles and chats with them in his Alabama tongue and says just exactly what he wants to say to them without knowing the first thing about German grammar! It is just Bill himself that they like - though how disappointed they all were the first day they went down to the shower-baths and found that Bill came out of the shower just the same chocolate brown as he went in!

Basil Eastland