„Displaced persons" in Billbrook

When the British army moved into Hamburg after the surrender without a fight on May 3, 1945, it found a total of around 110,000 foreign workers, prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates in 571 camps, who were soon referred to as "displaced persons" (DPs). One of the most important tasks was to provide these people, many of whom were in terrible conditions, with appropriate accommodation, food, clothing and medical care and to repatriate them to their countries of origin as quickly as possible.

Temporary accommodation in the industrial area

Repatriation proved to be particularly difficult for people from the Soviet Union, the Baltic states and Poland. Some of them feared persecution as traitors, others had lost their families. Or their places of origin had been destroyed, were now under communist rule or were now in the Soviet Union due to the Polish transfer to the West. The British occupying forces quickly set up four camps for this group of people
four camps, two of which were located on the eastern edge of the Billbrook industrial area: the "Flakturm camp" at the end of Berzeliusstrasse and the "Funkturm camp" on Unterer Landweg. Several hundred forced laborers were housed here until the end of the war. A camp with 60 so-called "Nissenhütten" was soon added at the end of the tidal canal.

The "Funkturm camp" existed until the end of the 1960s.
While the number of DPs steadily declined, the city increasingly housed homeless people here.
In 1969, around 900 people were living here.
Geschichtswerkstatt Billstedt

Four square meters to live in

When the camp was handed over to the German authorities in May 1950, there were six collective accommodation facilities for DPs with a total of around 4,000 residents. In Billbrook, this was the "radio tower camp" with 604 people, which consisted of 34 barracks and a communal building with a kitchen. Soon afterwards, meals became chargeable and rent had to be paid. The average space per person in 1952 was four to six square meters. At the same time, the DPs now received unemployment and welfare benefits, although this was accompanied by an obligation to work.

Barracks of the "radio tower camp". The district manager Kalff, who was in charge of dismantling the camp at the end of the 1960s, said in retrospect: "The human misery you saw there was such that you couldn't sleep."
Film still: Erwin Beling/Ortsamt Billstedt, 1968

Raids and discrediting

The authorities, the press and the German population often viewed the DPs as criminals, which made it difficult for them to find work. The police frequently carried out raids on their accommodation. The Germans were reluctant to be reminded of the reasons for the DPs' presence in Germany. They were soon referred to as "homeless foreigners" instead of "displaced persons". Their German partners were often defamed as prostitutes and "Polish whores", which caused many relationships to fail.

The first page of a list from the social welfare authorities from 1951, in which the non-German persons living in the "Funkturmlager" were listed.
Arolsen-Archives, DocID 70639175

Nissenhütten ("Nissen huts")
Named after their Canadian inventor Peter Norman Nissen, the 11.5 x 5 meter small corrugated iron huts with a round roof were used as simple makeshift accommodation in prison, displaced persons and refugee camps. In some cases, people lived here due due to overcrowding and poor hygiene. Nissen designed the model for the British army as early as 1916, as a cheap and mobile dwelling.
Photo: Nissenhütten in Hamburg, 1950s; Neuengamme concentration camp memorial site