

The Blechhammer camp was primarily made up of Jews, the majority of whom came from Poland.

Two days before the evacuation the Rapportführer SS Oberscharführer Tschappler declared: “This camp here will not be evacuated, and I emphatically quash all the rumours which claim that Unterscharführer Schmidt and myself are getting ready to depart. We’re not thinking of leaving the camp in the slightest. Or do you want to perhaps get away from here?” – Those gathered – the block elders – screamed enthusiastically no, for they all had the same ardent wish, to fall, together with the SS, in the hands of the Soviets.

The whole camp knew from newspaper reports, and also from the information one heard from the civilian workers on the construction site, that the Russian offensive had begun with unprecedented momentum and it was to be assumed that Blechhammer would be overrun by the Russians in the first onslaught.

Exactly 48 hours after this declaration by Tschappler, on 21 January 1945 the block elders were called to him later at night and told: “We (the SS) have received the order to abandon the camp. Everything is to be packed up and taken that can be carried”.

The news came like a bombshell to the camp inmates; only just before one had seen liberation standing directly on the doorstep.

The next morning, a Sunday, a frantic life began early on in the camp. From the warehouse stores, which were emptied, every prisoner received 1200 grams of bread, 500 grams of margarine, some 500 grams of tinned meat or a small cube of artificial honey. The clothing stores distributed what was there, and the extremely nervous mass whipped the clothes and shoes from their hands. Everything was unleashed, and one had the clear feeling: disintegration!

March off was midday. As “fall in” was called, part of the mass hid in some 3,000 prisoners who had newly arrived the day before and came from the evacuated camp of Gleiwitz. By and large though, a 4,000-strong column was formed. Up the front the handcarts and sledges with baggage of the SS and the food supplies. This was followed by 150 women, who – isolated from us – were also amongst the interned and had done the camp work for us in the kitchen, laundry and tailoring workshop.

Many of the prisoners – one can say the majority – were poorly clothed and above all insufficiently shod. They wore zebra-like striped linen uniforms, had no pullovers and the wooden shoes were far too heavy and too large to complete a foot march of some 220 km in ice and snow.

Translated by Paul Bowman

