

Blechhammer

by

Duane L. "Sparky" Bohnstedt
460th Bomb Group Historian

The names Blechhammer, The Lost City of Atlantis and Shangri-La all share the quality of mysticism. Blechhammer, however, was real, not a fantasy. Like Atlantis and Shangri-La, you cannot find it on a map; it was not a city, or a location that is identified by that name today. Some of the ruins of Blechhammer North and South are still there, and the power plant at Blechhammer South has been rebuilt, and is in operation. While we remember Blechhammer as a synthetic oil plant, it was in reality much more than that.

In June 1942 Blechhammer, or Blachownia Slaska as it is known today, was established as a forced labor camp for Jews near the town of Kozle, 18.5 miles west of Gleiwitz, Poland. The first prisoners brought there were used in the construction of a synthetic oil plant that we knew as Blechhammer (Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke, AG.) Soon after the camp was established, a typhus outbreak resulted in 120 prisoners being sent to Auschwitz where they were exterminated. The remaining prisoners were moved to a new and larger site. New prisoners were brought to the camp, mostly Jews from Upper Silesia, but there were others from fifteen different countries. In all there were over 5,500 in the camp; of these, 1,500 died at the camp. Living conditions at the camp were poor at best. Prisoners were housed in wooden barracks without running water or proper sanitary facilities. Diarrhea, tuberculosis and the lack of food were the fate of many. In April 1944 Blechhammer became a satellite camp of Auschwitz, named Arbeitslager Blechhammer, a.k.a. Labor Camp Blechhammer.

Unknown to many is the fact that there were six British prisoner of war camps in the Blechhammer, Heydebreck and Odertal area. About 2,000, mostly captured in North Africa, were employed in the oil plants to clean up after air raids, to maintain equipment and to perform other duties.

One camp, Kanal Lager, measured 220 yards by 220 yards. It was situated between the Oder canal and the main road, about three quarters of a mile from the main gate of the Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke, AG (Blechhammer North). Next door was Camp E3, a working party from Stalag 8B Lamsdorf (Lambinowice). Across the road was a camp, housing British POWs from Italy, and nearby a Jewish concentration camp. As was the case for prisoners of war in other camps about to be overrun by Soviet forces, the Germans began an evacuation of prisoners from Blechhammer. The prisoners were given 800 grams of bread, a small amount of margarine, and artificial honey for their march.

On 21 January 1945, about 4,000 prisoners from Blechhammer, plus another 6,000 from the sub-camps Neu Dachs, Gleiwitz I, II and IV began their death march. Those who survived reached the concentration camp Gross-Rosen on 2 February 1945. During the march there were about 800 prisoners who were unable to walk any further, or tried to flee; they were shot by the SS. Those who survived the march were sent to Buchenwald.

Blechhammer was a large industrial complex which consisted of many different industries. Included were Elektrwnia Blachownia, Zaklady Chemiczne Blachownia,, I. G. Farbenindustrie Hydebreck and others. Supporting these were slave labor camps with up to 50,000 prisoners. Slave labor not only provided workers for factories; it was used for many other needs, including farming, mining and mine construction, the repair and maintenance of railways and railway equipment, poultry and fish farms, plant construction and many other needs. There were fourteen camps in the Blechhammer complex providing labor for the industries located there.

The synthetic oil facility, Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke AG, was operated by I. G. Farbinindustrie. The refinery was divided into two plants: Blechhammer North and Blechhammer South. Blechhammer North was located south of the town of Blachownia. Blechhammer South was situated southeast of what is known today as Kedzierzyn-Kozle. Both were adjacent to railway lines and branches of the Oder Canal.

Germany's deposits of natural petroleum were limited, so pre-war it initiated a program to turn bituminous and brown coal into gasoline. The synthetic fuel industry was encouraged to develop this process by high taxes on imported fuel and mergers among producers. Even with these massive efforts, the Germans were unable to build up substantial reserves, and it entered the war in 1939 with only a three months supply of aviation gasoline and a two months supply of auto fuel. As the war progressed, the Germans were able to increase the availability of oil products by taking over the petroleum resources in the countries it invaded, and by the expansion of synthetic fuel facilities. They were able to build up, and temporarily satisfy their needs.

The process of producing synthetic fuel is somewhat different from that for natural oil plants. In the Bergius process, synthetic gasoline is made from coal, with the quality of the end product dependent on the quality of the coal used. Bituminous coal yielded gasoline suitable for aviation use, and brown coal for automobiles. With the Fischer Tropsch process, coke is the raw material. In these plants the Germans were able also to produce nitrogen (in the form of ammonia) and methanol, both raw materials for explosives and chemicals. Successful aerial attacks on these plants not only reduced the supply of motor fuel, it decreased the supply of material needed to manufacture explosives.

Before the activation of the Fifteenth Air Force, consideration was given to the subject of enemy oil, but it was determined that most oil targets were beyond the range of bombers based in North Africa and other targets had higher priorities. When the Fifteenth Air Force came into the picture, its maximum efficient bomber range was seven hundred miles from Foggia. Three important petroleum basins, which produced 90 percent of natural crude oil available to the enemy were located within that range. Ideally, it would have been best to keep the petroleum from being pumped from the ground, but widely separated wells, derricks, pumps and storage tanks were not good targets for high altitude bombing. The logical targets were the refineries. There were about sixty plants within range of the Fifteenth Air Force, with twenty-two of these concentrated around Ploesti, Budapest and Vienna.

On 4 May 1944 the Fifteenth Air Force was authorized to attack the oil refineries at Ploesti, Romania, thus beginning an offensive which would greatly contribute to the defeat of Germany. To accomplish this, it established three objectives to deny the enemy the petroleum products it needed to conduct the war: 1. Destroy the Romanian refineries at Ploesti and Bucharest; 2. Destroy twelve natural oil refineries in Central Europe; 3. Eliminate the synthetic oil refineries at Brux (one of the three largest producers of gasoline in Europe), Blechhammer North, Blechhammer South and Odertal (where 22 percent of the synthetic oil was produced). Although fewer bombs were dropped on synthetic oil plants than other lower priority targets in Austria, the success rate was greater for the synthetic oil plants. Brux, Blechhammer, Odertal, and Ruhland (near Dresden) produced three-fourths of all fuel, and almost all aviation fuel within the range of the Fifteenth Air Force.

Those who served with the Fifteenth Air Force during World War II will remember Blechhammer, if only by name. Missions to Blechhammer were long, tiring, and always dangerous. The 460th Bomb Group (H) flew nine missions to Blechhammer South and two to Blechhammer North, at a cost of ten aircraft. Several of these were victims of the 25 flak batteries defending the Blechhammer/Odertal area. The guns ranged in size from 20mm to 128mm. Many of these were manned by students as young as fifteen years.

Near the end of 1944, the Germans saw a dramatic decline in the production of synthetic fuel and other products at the Blechhammer Oil Plant and other facilities. Acutely aware of the fuel situation, and what it meant to Germany's ability to continue the war, German General Field Marshal von Rundstedt sent a report entitled "Conservation of Motor Fuel" to Adolph Hitler, advising him of the seriousness of the situation. He also stated that he had issued an order, to preserve for the battle front, the minimum requirements for the use of motor fuel. It was forbidden to use motor vehicles when the same purpose could be served by railways. Motor fuel was to be used only for combat purposes (Panzers, Assault Guns, and important messages or supply trips). The order went so far as to say that those using motor fuel for any purpose, other than the

prosecution of the war, would be considered saboteurs and subject to discipline. He outlined in detail all procedures that needed to be taken to conserve gasoline. This order became effective 15 November 1944.

For all practical purposes, by late December 1944 the oil plants of Blechhammer and Odertal were destroyed. The 460th flew its last mission to Blechhammer on 19 December 1944. Today Blechhammer no longer exists, but it lives on in the town of Blachownia. It is a thriving industrial center which focuses on the production of chemicals, synthetic fuel and other products. Zakłady Chemiczne Blachownia manufactures plastics; Poludniowe Zakłady is a synthetic refinery. The I. G. Farbenindustrie chemical plant is still there on the Blechhammer site, producing chemical products based on coke and coal. It employs 3,000 workers. In addition to being industrial centers, Kedzierzyn-Kozle and Odertal are popular recreation areas. Times have changed!

Duane L. Bohnstedt
Copyright 2004