

By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

An image persists in my head of a Nazi concentration camp as a scale model of itself. A diorama of rigid rank and file, ruled lines, monochrome grids of ultra-utility, completely void of colour.

It features tiny people, the size and gravity of hundreds and thousands, placed for a sense of proportion. Almost weightless vehicles, which one might bluntly propel along the alleys with a fingertip, careful not to catch a cuff on any fragile unfixed element; a lacework of fencing, a frill of barbed wire, a phalanx of Shepherds frozen in a pack snarl.

The low buildings, the less than toy sized tanks and trucks and lorries, the vermicelli figures, civvies in inappropriate poses – for what designer dreams up realistic action figures to illustrate a death camp ? - all as grey and raw and ragged-edged as unpainted plastic.

Are there trees, manicured groupings around the perimeter? A clockwork railway siding nearby ? The Germans make the best model railways.

These flat and utterly anonymous rows make colour, spontaneity, individuality, most famously, in Adorno's phrase, poetry, seem impossible. Life is dull as lead through the inverse alchemy of mass murder. People reduced by process; persons rendered to product. Any talk of aesthetics, or frivolity, or personal vanity seems, what; irrelevant, insensitive, absurd, obscene?

Yet Vassily Grossman, whose reports from Madjanek and Treblinka was key evidence at Nuremberg, writes of young girls weeping as their heads were shaved on arrival, begging their guards, hundreds or thousands of miles from their former lives and hours from their extinction, to at least shave their hair evenly on both sides..

Red lipstick was the staple and signature of wartime glamour. Pared down, make do, universally available and compatible with any uniform. Think of the Powell and Pressburger movie, 'A Matter of Life and Death'. The lushly painted mouth of radio operator Kim Hunter a breath from the microphone as she tries to talk David Niven's crippled bomber in to landing.

What could be more urgently vital ("you're life, and I'm leaving it") than that giant carmine mouth in Technicolor close-up ?

"A barren wilderness, bare as a chicken run," wrote Lt Col Mervin Willett Gonin in April 1945 when the 6th Guards Armoured Brigade entered Belsen. "One had to get used early to the idea that the individual just did not count. One knew that five hundred a day were dying and that five hundred a day were going on dying for weeks before anything we could do would have the slightest effect."

And then something happened which seems so improbable, so imaginative and so courageous that the story appears apocryphal. Google 'red lipstick' and 'Belsen' and you will happen upon

blogs and chatrooms questioning its veracity. Banksy's website features the story, and an image illustrating it. I came across it in a newspaper feature decades ago, and have never forgotten it.

"It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for those internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity."

The source? About as authentic as you can get, and available to anyone who cares to examine it. Lt Col Gonin's diary is kept in the Imperial War Museum. You can make an appointment to go and have a look at those paragraphs. I shall keep them in my mind as I fly out to Poland this summer and visit one of the camps, a talisman to clutch as I push out from the safety of the scale model and try to confront the real thing.