

New Fiction from Patrick Hicks: Into the Tunnel

Editor's Note: "Into the Tunnel" is the first chapter of Patrick Hicks's new novel, ECLIPSE.

"The rocket will free man from his remaining chains, the chains of gravity which still tie him to this planet. It will open to him the gates of heaven."

—Wernher von Braun

He was tired and cold when they arrived from Auschwitz. The moon hung above him, battered and beaten, as he trudged down a long concrete road with thousands of other men. The train that had carried him across Germany huffed in the night. A whistle pierced the frosty air—it was a single note, strangled into silence. The huffing engine took on water and he licked his dry lips. He tried to swallow. Searchlights paced the dark as dogs strained against their leashes, their front paws wheeling the air. Guards stood along the road and yelled at the prisoners to move faster, faster. Behind him, bodies were tossed out of the railcars. They hit the pebbly ground in sickening thuds. Stones skittered away.

Eli Hessel glanced at the moon. It looked like it had been pistol whipped, wounded.

"Move it, you pieces of shit!"

Another voice chimed in. "March in unison! Your left . . . left . . . left."

He had no idea where he was or where he was going. The shadowy bulk of a hill was on his right and, in the moonlight, he could see that a haze of pine trees lined its ridge. To his left were strange metal cylinders with nozzles on them. They

were stacked on flatbed rail cars.

The men kept moving, trudging, schlepping. Their wooden clogs clacked against the concrete road. Dogs continued to snap and bark. There was the smell of wet fur. And there was something else too, a smell he couldn't quite place at first. It was a mixture of oil and creosote. There was also—he breathed deeply—there was also the smell of decaying bodies. It was the stink of rotting meat and grapefruit. That's what a corpse smelled like. During the past few months he had plenty of time to familiarize himself with it.

But where was he?

The journey from Auschwitz had been hard. They'd been stuffed into wooden cattle cars and, as they rocked and clattered over hundreds of miles of tracks, these men, who had been crammed in cheek by jowl, had to relieve themselves where they stood. The weakest slipped to the floor. Many of them never got up again.

Eli stumbled. He was woozy. His lips were chapped and his tongue was leathery. It hurt to swallow. He couldn't make spit. On his lower back, at that place where the spine meets the pelvic girdle, he had a perfect bruise. A hobnail boot had kicked him into the cattle car a few days ago when he left Auschwitz, and although he couldn't see it, he knew it must look like a horseshoe with studded dots. Whenever he twisted his waist, a sharp firework of pain sizzled up his spine. He worried that his vertebra was shattered but there was nothing he could do about it. He had to walk faster. He hobbled. He tried to stay at the front of the line because prisoners were being beaten with metal rods behind him. The road beneath his clogs was splashed with oil. Or maybe it was blood? It was hard to tell at night.

"In unison, you pieces of shit! Left . . . left . . . left."

He ignored the nipping pain in his stomach and watched his

feet move on their own. The blue and white stripes of his trouser legs swung in and out of view beneath him. He wondered if they were being taken to a gas chamber. He'd seen it happen at Auschwitz many times before. He'd seen whole families walk down a gravel path to a gas chamber and he'd seen the black tar of their bodies rumble up from a crematorium at night. Flames shot out from the chimney and the whole sky above Auschwitz was stained a dull orange. The heat from thousands of bodies made the moon shimmer.

He focused on his swinging legs and didn't think about his mother or father, his younger brother, or his grandparents. They were gone. They'd been turned into ash long ago. And yet, against all odds, he was somehow still alive.

"Faster, you sons of bitches!" a guard yelled. "We don't have all night."

Maybe he could run away? Maybe he could slip into the night?

Barbed wire was on either side of him—he could see that—and there was the shadow of a wooden guard tower illuminated beneath a searchlight up ahead. No doubt the fence was electrified. To run would mean—what, exactly? All of Germany was a concentration camp.

"Move it you useless eaters, you pieces of *SHIT!*"

The guard was from Berlin. Eli could tell from his accent. How could he be so angry, so full of venom? And while he was thinking about this, something surprising and alarming appeared up ahead.

The rail tracks curved into a mountain. There was a tunnel. A huge one. Two massive sodium lights sparkled overhead like twin stars and they cast long shadows on the ground. A cloud of moths jittered in the lights and, for a long moment, he wondered what they might taste like. Dusty, he thought.

When it became obvious they were going into the tunnel, Eli looked around in wild terror for a chimney or a vent. Were gas chambers in there? Underground? His muscles tensed and he almost stopped walking. He had to force his legs to keep on moving even though he was shakingly afraid of what he would find up ahead.

Calm down, he told himself. It didn't make sense to ship them halfway across Germany only to kill them. The Nazis could have done that at Auschwitz.

"It's okay," he whispered to himself. "Yes, all is well."

But the claws of fear continued to scratch at the inside of his skull. His asshole tightened and his eyes darted to the left and right. If this *was* a work camp, where were the other prisoners?

The moon was swallowed by a cloud and this made the dark beyond the searchlights absolute. The moon had been snuffed out, choked. Two enormous iron gates on either side of the tunnel were wide open, and camouflage netting was strung above the entrance like an awning. A white wooden sign was suspended from the ceiling and someone had taken the time to get the calligraphy just right.

Alles für den Krieg

Alles für den Sieg

Eli looked around. It was understood by everyone that German was the only language that mattered in the Reich. If a prisoner was confused or didn't understand something that was shouted at him, well then, he would learn soon enough.

When they entered the tunnel, a sudden dampness fell over his skin. It felt like a heavy wet cloak had been placed over his shoulders. He began to shiver. And somewhere up ahead, metal banged against metal—it was deep and rhythmic—double-syllabled—*bah-wung—bah-wung—bah-wung*. There was also the low

hum of a generator to his right. Floodlights cast grotesque shadows on the wall. He looked around and realized that everything he could see must have been hewn out of the rock by hand. The floor. The walls. The curved ceiling. How many prisoners had died making this place, this cave?



Modern-day view of the tunnels where the V-2s were made. Photo by Patrick Hicks.

They passed a cluster of SS guards who stood around laughing at some joke. They smoked and paid no attention to the column of prisoners that shuffled past them. Bright balls of orange glowed at the ends of their cigarettes. They pushed each other playfully and talked about roasting a wild boar. For a moment, Eli allowed himself to imagine what it might taste like. The fibrous meat, the juices, the sucking of the marrow from bone.

“Keep moving!” someone shouted from the rear. Surprisingly, it

was a French accent.

Steel pipes were bolted to the walls and he wondered what they were for. When he looked up at the high rounded ceiling he felt claustrophobia run through his chest like spiders. For several long moments he had to fight a wild urge to run. What if the ceiling collapsed? How many thousands of tons of rock were above him? Eli looked for support beams but couldn't see any. The air around him was thick and oppressive and cold. It crowded his lungs. His nose was chilly.

He focused on his wooden clogs. They were badly stained from the mud of Auschwitz and he counted his steps as a way to control his fear.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

All is well, he told himself. Yes, all is well.

When he looked up, he saw a winch and two dangling chains. The rhythmic banging got louder. *Bah-WUNG. Bah-WUNG. Bah-WUNG.* There were hundreds of prisoners working in the tunnel up ahead. They were dressed in blue and white striped uniforms like him. The light was weak and this made the underground world feel sunken and submerged. What were they doing? Mining for gold?

As he got closer, he realized they were hunched over tables and assembling something that looked like gearboxes. Others worked on metal tanks. Down a side tunnel, a group of prisoners carried a huge nozzle. It was the size of a church bell.

"Drop it and you get twenty lashes!" a voice roared.

It was a kapo. This man was given extra food if he agreed to do the dirty work of the Nazis. In exchange for beating his fellow prisoners, he was given a good night of sleep and a full belly. The nozzle suddenly teetered sideways, the metal

cone slipped against the wall, and when it bounced onto the ground—sending out a low ringing sound—the kapo immediately began hammering a prisoner with a stick. The blows rained down. Bloody stains formed on the man's back.

“Be gentle with that!” the kapo shouted. “Gentle! Gentle! Gentle!”

An SS officer watched all of this with bored curiosity. Cigarette smoke vented from his nose. Eli studied this man's clean face, his manicured hands, and he couldn't help but notice the high polish of the man's jackboots. They twinkled in a perfection of night. Eli turned away when the guard looked at the parade of arriving prisoners. He knew better than to look the SS in the eye. Surely the rules of Auschwitz must apply in this place too.

“Fresh rags,” the SS guard yelled out. He took a long drag on his cigarette. “Welcome!”

As they marched deeper into the tunnel, Eli saw that many of the prisoners didn't have shoes. Their feet were bloody and caked with grime. He also became aware of the overpowering smells around him: diesel, the sulfurous burn of arc welding, and there was something else too. He recognized it from that factory at Auschwitz. His teeth tasted of iron. There were pools of water on the floor and he wondered if he could bend down and cup some into his hands. A kapo, however, was marching next to him. The man twirled a metal rod.

All around him were the scrapping of spades against wet rubble. The floodlights of the tunnel gave way to carbide lamps. Soon everything flickered and it was hard to see. He stumbled over a thick cable and nearly fell. Others were having trouble too.

When they rounded a corner, he decided to chance it. Eli bent down for a handful of water. It was beautiful and wet and primal against his skin, but when it passed over the dry seal

of his lips he spit it out. It tasted of urine.

A moment later, they came to a halt.

The sound of hundreds of clogs coming to a stop filled up the tunnel. It was like horses clattering to a standstill.

At first, Eli couldn't tell what was before him. He squinted and waited for his eyes to adjust. A skirt of light fanned onto—he wasn't sure what, exactly. There, in a long line, were giant metal tubes that looked something like torpedoes. Maybe they were for a secret submarine? Maybe they were for a massive U-Boat and they'd be sent across the Atlantic to attack New York or Boston?

A high-pitched voice came from the edge of the light.

"Mützen...ab!"

Eli and the others immediately took off their caps and slapped them against the seam of their trousers. They stood at stiff attention.

There was a long pause and, during this silence, Eli felt a sneeze coming on. He wriggled his nose in the hopes he could fight it off. In Auschwitz, he once saw a prisoner get hit in the face with a crowbar for sneezing. It killed the man. He fell to the ground like a sack of wheat. The tingling continued deep in his nasal cavity, so he held his breath.

A man in a business suit stood before them. He wore a white smock and, even from this distance, Eli could see the sparkle of a Nazi pin on his lapel. Lurking in the distance were SS officers. They stood back, smoking.

"You're in the heart of it now," a kapo yelled. He extended both arms as if he were a magician. "Welcome to *Takt Strasse*."

Eli had grown up in Berlin and he knew that a *takt* was a baton used by an orchestra conductor.

The kapo, who had the green triangle of a criminal stitched onto his striped uniform, pulled out a wooden club from behind a metal cabinet. He paced back and forth before adding, "On *Takt Strasse*, I keep time on your heads if you don't move quickly enough. Do you understand, my assholes?"

He brought the club down onto an imaginary head.

"In this place we build *rockets*." There was a deliberate pause. A knowing smile. "Yes, my assholes, we create machines the Americans and the British cannot even imagine. Our technology is going to win this war. You're standing in the future."

Eli looked at the torpedoes and nodded. Ah, he understood now. They weren't designed to fly through the water. They were designed to fly through air and come crashing down onto cities. His eyes opened in the horrible realization of what was around him. Each one of these rockets could kill...how many?

"You are enemies of the Reich and in this kingdom beneath the mountain you will work to destroy your own countries. Do you understand me?" There was another wide smile. "In this place you will build wonder weapons the likes of which the world has never seen."

He held the club and moved it like a scythe. "This is your last home, my assholes. The only way out of this camp is through the chimney." He opened his arms. His voice was suddenly bright and friendly. "Welcome to Dora!"

Eli didn't know what any of this meant, but he had a good idea. In Auschwitz, after his family had been sent into the sky, he had come to understand such speeches. In this place called Dora, death was a way of life. There would be death in the morning. Death in the afternoon. Death in the evening. Death would be everywhere, like oxygen. Death. Death. Death.

"Listen up," came another voice. It was deeper and darker.

“Approach the table in groups of five. We need to process you.”

And so it was that hundreds of starving men entered the most secret concentration camp in the Nazi empire. When it was Eli’s turn, he held his cap in both hands. He decided this made him look like a beggar, so he stood at attention. He stiffened his back.

“Age?”

“20.”

“Do you speak German?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Occupation?”

He needed to make himself useful because the Nazis believed one simple and ironclad rule: only valuable workers stayed among the living. Everyone else was wheeled into the darkness.

“I’m...an electrician,” he lied.

The prisoner behind the desk stamped a green work order and handed it to Eli without looking up. There was a number with an inky swastika punched over it. 41199.

Eli Hessel, a Jew from Berlin who hoped that many decades of life still lay ahead of him, turned from thoughts of the dead and let his mind focus on clear, clean water. Yes, he thought, he’d love a tall glass. There would be ice cubes, big ones, big enough to sting your upper lip when you took in the cool wetness. It would flow down his throat, wet and pure.

And with this image hovering on his tongue, he stepped into a sub-tunnel.

He went to work.

* *

The official name of the camp was KZ Dora-Mittelbau. The KZ stood for *Konzentrationslager* and work began on the tunnels on August 28, 1943 when a hundred prisoners from nearby Buchenwald were ordered to dig into the hardened rock of an abandoned gypsum mine. By the end of 1943, some 11,000 prisoners were hammering and blasting their way through a stubby mountain called the Kohnstein.

“Mountain” is too grand of a term, though. It was a ridge that lifted up from lush farmland, jack pines sprouted up from its hump, and it was home to a rich variety of wildlife. Beneath the soil was a tough rock called anhydrite. It was so hard, in fact, that tunnels didn’t need supporting beams, which is precisely why the Nazis decided to create a factory deep inside its heart. Huge internal spaces could be chiseled into the center of this mountain and, as a result, no American plane would ever spy the assembly line of V-2 rockets hidden inside. The Nazis knew the enemy would fly on, seeing nothing, suspecting nothing, and even if they found out what was happening in the cool depths of the earth, no bomb could ever punch its way down to the factory floor. It was a natural fortress. It was bomb proof. The war could never touch it.

In the early days of the camp’s existence, the growing cavity of rock was a place of constant noise and dust. Emaciated prisoners blasted holes into anhydrite around the clock. They hunched against walls before each deafening explosion—they pinched their eyes shut and held their breath—and as they crouched there with their hearts racing they must have wondered if the ceiling would collapse. Would the tonnage of rock suspended above continue to hold?

While they imagined a waterfall of rocks tumbling down onto their bodies, that’s when the cracking detonation of TNT happened up ahead. A huge cloud of rolling white covered them, it submerged them. Dust particles filled up their lungs.

Whenever they spit, their saliva became like paste.

Once the dust settled they were ordered to clear away the largest chunks of rock. The prisoners were ghosts that tossed huge jagged pieces into rail cars called *grubenhunten* and then, by sheer force of will, these men muscled the carts down a track and out into the sunlight. There, they tipped out their load, turned around, and went back into the tunnel for more.

These withered men with burst eardrums slept inside the mountain. And because there was no plumbing, this meant sanitary conditions were beyond disgusting. Men relieved themselves into barrels of diarrhea, they walked across streams of excrement, and they were given hardly any drinking water. As a result, disease spread at a fearsome rate and prisoners fell to the ground in unrelenting numbers. Still, the work continued. It went on day and night.

For the Nazis, they didn't care who lived and who died. It was slave labor. The bodies of these men were the property of the Reich. Even now, we're not entirely sure how many prisoners perished from all the blasting and hauling but the numbers are thought to be in the thousands. We do know that the dead were hauled away to Buchenwald where they were burnt in a crematorium. The SS at Dora-Mittelbau felt this was too inefficient—all those trucks traveling back and forth, wasting gasoline—so they requested their own oven for burning the dead. This wish was granted.

By early 1944, Tunnel A and Tunnel B were finished, along with rail tracks that led out from their gaping mouths. Some 35 million cubic feet of space was now available for rocket assembly. If we think of Tunnel A and Tunnel B running parallel to each other—with a slight S curve to both—there were forty-six smaller tunnels that connected them. In this way, seven and a half miles of space had been chiseled into the Kohnstein. The world's largest underground factory was

finally ready for use and, if everything went according to plan, the Nazis would soon rain warheads down onto cities in a way the world had never seen before.

One thing was certain: the idea of a rocket was about to move from the realm of science fiction into the realm of science fact. What would soon rise up from blueprints would not only change the course of the twentieth-century, it would rumble down through the years to come. It influences us still. It threatens us still.

* *

Eli knew none of this when he arrived because the prisoners who built the tunnels were all dead by the summer of 1944. However, even if he *did* know how Dora-Mittelbau had been created, would it really matter? Not to Eli. He only cared about the narrow road to survival. This was part of the literal and figurative tunnel vision that existed in the underground camp. All living prisoners felt this way. The present and the future were all that mattered. The past? The past didn't matter. It was a place of pain and loss. The past held images of happier times and of family members who had all been murdered. And so, Eli didn't think of the past. It ceased to exist. It was a weight that threatened to drag him down.

He was housed in Barrack 118 along with 400 other men. It was a clapboard shack with thin windows and a dirt floor. It was one of many barracks that had been set up outside the tunnels and the whole outdoor complex was surrounded by electrified wire. Searchlights roamed the night. In the distance, dogs barked and he could hear classical music drifting out from the SS camp. Occasionally, laughter sliced the night air and, once or twice, he heard the sound of gunfire. The SS at Dora consisted almost entirely of men who had long careers at other concentration camps. They knew what they were doing. They were stone faced professionals.

Triple layered bunks had been shoved into Barrack 118 and it was here that shivering men nuzzled into each other for warmth. As the curfew siren wailed out, Eli searched for sleep. After sixteen hours of work—during which time he'd seen five men collapse from hunger and another beaten to death—getting a good night of sleep took on existential importance. A night of sleep might repair the damage that had been done to his joints and ligaments, it might help clot wounds, and it might allow his back to heal.

His uniform was infested with lice and, whenever he tried to slip into the syrupy void of rest, he could feel little mouths walking across the landscape of his body, nibbling here, nibbling there. If he thought about it too much it seemed like his skin was on fire, like he had already been shoved into the crematorium.

He scratched his eyebrow and felt a white speck moving beneath his fingernail. The man next to him twitched in sleep. His breath stank and, gauging from the smell of shit that was on the man, he obviously had dysentery and hadn't made it to the barrel in time. While the man snored, Eli studied his skeletal face, how the eyes darted back and forth beneath papery lids. Maybe this man, this stranger with a homosexual's pink triangle on his uniform, would magic into a corpse in the next few hours? Such things happened. Just yesterday the kapos woke up Barrack 118 for morning roll call and seven men had died during the night. One of them had hanged himself.

Eli glanced out the window. The moon was pock-marked and brilliant. He saw that it was bleached white, just like the walls of the tunnels of Dora. In the drowsy chambers of his imagination, he wondered if the moon and the tunnels were made from the same rock. He saw himself quarrying into the moon, digging down, down, down, deep into its belly where he could sleep in peaceful glowing warmth. Sleep, he thought. To drift away...

A gust of wind rattled the window.

He adjusted his wooden clogs beneath his head. They hurt the base of his skull but that was far better than waking up to find that someone had stolen them during the night. Imagine walking into the tunnels with bare feet, he thought. He could almost feel the cold against his toes.

When he was kid, he loved feeling grass beneath his feet. July sunshine trickled down through oak leaves and the warmth was delicious. He imagined stopping at a café for a slice of chocolate gateaux. Maybe he'd sink a finely polished fork into frosting and lift the crumbling goodness to his lips where—

He opened his eyes and felt a hundred mouths on his body. Stop, he counseled himself. Go to sleep. Go to sleep so that you may live.

And with that, he drifted into the abyss.

The lice, meanwhile, continued to feed.

* *

Unlike other camps in the Nazi system, Dora didn't have a grand gatehouse that prisoners marched through on their way to forced labor. In places like Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen, and Dachau, the phrase *Arbeit Macht Frei* was emblazoned over a main gate. By contrast, the gate at Dora was simple, artless, and had no such phrase. There was, however, an unofficial slogan in the camp that everyone knew. It hung silently in the air. Sometimes the SS even said this phrase during roll call. "*Vernichtung durch arbeit.*" Extermination through work.

This was the essential element of Dora and we should note that between the years 1943 and 1945, one in three prisoners died there. Work camps like Dora realized they didn't need a gas chamber: they simply had to work prisoners to death and, by doing so, they could extract as much useful labor as possible.

In his first week there, Eli came to know Dora well. There were the tunnels, of course, where he and thousands of others were forced to work. This underground area of camp was called Mittelbau, and this is where the world's first rocket was built. In the years to come, the designer of the V-2, Wernher von Braun, would shed his Nazi past and go on to create the thunderous Saturn V for NASA, which lifted American astronauts to the moon. The bargain for the United States was simple: ignore von Braun's past and in return he would deliver the most powerful rocket the world had ever seen. Whenever questions about Dora-Mittelbau *did* come up in later life, von Braun would simply smile and talk about Apollo, and Tranquility Base, and the bright pull of the future.

To the west of the tunnel entrance was the SS camp. This was off limits to the prisoners and yet, whenever they marched past, they could see fine homes, a fancy pub, dog kennels, and vegetable gardens. Just to the south of the SS camp was the rail yard where the V-2s were loaded onto trains and sent to launching pads across Germany. Further to the west was the gatehouse of the prison camp. Aside from a horrible stench lifting into the air—a stench that stung the eyes—the first thing a visitor might notice would be the guard towers, the searchlights, and the barbed-wire. The prisoners were woken at four in the morning by kapos. They entered the barracks with rubber truncheons and flayed away until everyone was assembled for roll call. Thousands of striped uniforms had to stand at attention while the SS strolled among them, roaring out commands. Dogs strained at leashes. Men in guard towers yawned and smoked cigarettes. They lifted their machine guns and took aim while a swastika on a flagpole snapped and rippled in the shadowy blue of sunrise.

Roll call lasted for hours. The prisoners stood at attention with their caps off while a kapo read off their numbers in German. Eli listened for his new name as a soft breeze moved through his uniform. He was no longer Eli Hessel. He was

41199.

The numbers were always shouted out.

“VIER EINS EINS NEUN NEUN!”

“*Jawohl!*”

He raised his hand and was counted among the living.

As the count went on, crows circled overhead. They wheeled around and landed on barrack rooftops. They cawed and hopped. Sometimes, if the wind was right, Eli could hear church bells bonging in the valley below. Wisps of smoke lifted up from unseen chimneys. He wondered what they were eating for breakfast. Eggs? He liked to imagine eggs. Boiled. Poached. Fried. Scrambled. Thick with butter.

When they were dismissed, everyone rushed for rutabaga soup, a slice of moldy bread, and coffee that tasted of acorns. When Eli drank the soup for the first time, he noticed that it tasted of petroleum. Blobs of oil floated on top. The soup arrived in fifty gallon drums—they probably held fuel once—but he didn’t care about this. He poured the soup into his mouth and tore at the green bread. The coffee too disappeared. When it was all over, he looked at his dirty hands and ached for more. Many of the prisoners went over to the empty metal drums and began to lick them clean with their tongues. One of the cooks, a burly man with thick forearms, hit them with a ladle.

“Stand back. That’s all for today!”

Some prisoners ate lice off their shirt. Others ate snails off fence posts. Others tried to eat leaves or tufts of grass. Eli watched all of this and wondered if he, too, might do the same thing in a few weeks. Yes, concluded. Yes.

An announcement crackled out from the camp loudspeaker. “Attention . . .” There was a shriek of feedback. “Return to the roll call square. Return to the roll call square

immediately.”

They moved back and lined up. A brass band started to play and, in this way, thousands of men marched out of Dora for the tunnels of Mittelbau. The work day had begun.

As they moved for the tunnels, and the rockets, and all that the future might bring, Eli glanced at the guard towers. The wind picked up and the trees began to rustle. Birds soared overhead, riding the currents into quieter valleys. Behind the prisoners, the crematorium rumbled softly. The tall chimney looked like an inverted rocket. It belched up tarry exhaust, staining the bright blue sky with the fuel of flesh and bone.

His arms were heavy and he shuffled carefully to keep his clogs from falling off.

They turned for the tunnel. It was a gigantic black opening, a wide mouth. Soon, the long column of starving men were swallowed by the mountain. Eaten.

Eli focused on what lay ahead. No matter what happened, he told himself, he must not give up. He must fight to the death to live.