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Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical

Book review

Stephen Cole

2006

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Jumping the Line: The Adventures and Misadventures of an American Radical by William Herrick, Introduction by Paul Berman

Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2001

ISBN 1-902593-42-1, Paper, \$14.95/[pounds sterling]10.00 xxiii, 279 pp

Jumping the Line is a great portmanteau of a book—unwieldy, poorly packed, the contents repeatedly threatening to spill out of the narrative altogether. It is also irresistible. On the basis of his memoir, William Herrick was not a particularly likeable character: admirable in many ways, to be sure; brutally honest about his and others' failings, absolutely—but difficult to feel affection for. Yet his story is so compelling in large part because he does not disguise his shortcomings, especially in youth and early adulthood.

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Scanned from Anarchist Studies 14.2 (Autumn-Winter 2006): p189

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'Jumping the line', Herrick informs us, is 'hobo slang for hopping a freight, hitting the road, copping a beat, skedaddling' (p. ix), and in his youth he did his share of hoboeing through the Midwest and Southeast from his home in New York City. But jumping the line serves as a metaphor for the larger story of his life as recounted here, the decision to end what had been a lifelong association with the Communist party. Countless other memoirs have sketched the world of immigrant Jewish radicalism in New York City, but none has done so better than Herrick. He demonstrates brilliantly what immersion in the world of the Party meant: it permeated almost every aspect of one's existence so that to leave it meant repudiating not simply a political affiliation but also a way of life, an identity.

That identity was formed early. Herrick grew up in Trenton, New Jersey, and the Bronx. His father—a Russian immigrant—died when Herrick was four, so he and his sister and brother were raised by an improvident mother and an extended family for whom radical politics and Yiddish were common languages. His mother was a seamstress and committed Communist, and in widowhood, much to her son's dismay, unapologetically took a succession of lovers. Often moving when the accumulated arrears of rent became too great to remain, the family eventually landed in the Communist Co-ops in the Bronx, where life acquired some predictability, at least for a while. Typically, Herrick attended summer camps, read voraciously, played sports, and attended meetings of the Young Pioneers. By sixteen he was a member of the Young Communist League. Herrick's accounting of this milieu is at times delightful, capturing the intensity and depth of the movement's politics but balancing them with his emergent adolescent interest in sex, and the ongoing saga of his mother's lovers and the dramatically contrasting worlds in which she moved—from cafe society to union picket lines to hosting clandestine meetings of Party leaders. There is a darker side too—the braggadocio of youth doesn't entirely explain the swagger of the young Herrick. He readily admits he was insecure, that the chaos of home life took a toll, and that he was

jealous of other boys and their comfort around girls and ideas. The result was an irascible, tough, angry, horny young man (his book at times reminds this reader of the unsavouriness of Elia Kazan's autobiography), who never shrank from a fight and admits that he could always be relied upon when the Party needed to employ some strong-arm tactics. The order he craved he found in the Party. 'I believed everything I was told by the Party', he recalls. 'I didn't really have to be told anything, I inhaled it' (p49). Herrick, however, did not cut himself off entirely from opposing ideas: most notably, a friendship from his youth with a neighbourhood kid, Nathan Shlechter, resonates through the years, and in Herrick's memory 'Natie' functions as his moral gyroscope.

June 1932 was an inauspicious time to graduate from high school. The nation was in the grip of the Great Depression, and Herrick soon found himself in a succession of poorly paid jobs. Salvation came the following year in the opportunity to join the Sunrise Co-operative Farm in Saginaw Valley, Michigan. This was a curious destination for a committed Communist, for the Sunrise colony was organized by anarchists; perhaps some of its principles rubbed off on him, though it would take a series of epiphanies to detach him from his devotion to the Party. His account of Sunrise is by turns comical—the 'Yiddishists' and Communists at odds, for example, but all in agreement about the dreadfulness of the communally-prepared food—and sad—in its portrayal of idealism overwhelmed by petty arguments and practicalities, not least the physical and temperamental fitness of needle trades workers for farm life. The Sunrise interlude lasted barely eighteen months. Soon Herrick was back East, picking up work where he could and establishing his value as a Party functionary, first in an abortive attempt to organize sharecroppers in southern Georgia and then on his home turf in New York organizing for the Furriers Union. By then the Popular Front had been declared. The irony of embracing those only yesterday denounced as social fascists was not lost on Herrick, but he 'was a believer; the Party was my home, and I needed it. I didn't

want to go on the bum again. I wanted an anchor. The Party was my anchor ... I needed a place. The Party was my place, my family, my tribe, my country. I fended Natie off, knowing he was right ... I detested the Party's new line and pretended not to, went gung ho for it, screamed at Natie, told him he was too pure' (p118).

The strength of Herrick's fidelity would be tested in Spain where he served in the earliest battles of the Abraham Lincoln battalion of the International Brigade—and where he would learn about betrayal. Though it would take a further three years before he would jump the line and quit the Party, the fissure in his political and moral universe was already growing even as he was forced to observe the worst consequences of the lie he had embraced for so long. He is as unstinting in his admiration of the courage of his fellow soldiers as he is merciless in exposing the lengths to which the Party went to undermine the Spanish revolution and those who fell outside the domain of the Popular Front, specifically the anarchists and the POUM. But it was the individual acts of injustice, cruelty, and political retribution that seemed to have left the strongest mark on Herrick. There's an odd tension at this point that Herrick never satisfactorily resolves between his growing recognition of the treachery of the Soviets and their zealous acolytes and his outrage at witnessing evidence of it. Rumours of disappearances, torture, and murder were one thing, but when he is caught up in a Party test of his own loyalty he recognises his passive acquiescence in the execution of three young Spanish for what it is—complicity. Desertion was out of the question—those captured were executed—but in any event Herrick found he 'was able to dissemble without being truly being aware of it. My anger and my fear combined to protect me against my new enemy, my former self. Just say one word of criticism of the Comintern, the leadership, the line, and I was down your throat. I hated the very idea of giving up my nest, my mass, my friends' (p205).

Repatriated because of his wounds, Herrick found himself feted as a hero and giving speeches for the cause, though neither his

heart nor his mind were in it. As before, however, he needed the Party and its networks—now not only for a job—he was given light duties with his old union—but also for the medical care it paid for. His exit from this world would be gradual: he trained as a court reporter—eventually organizing a union for the freelancers—stopped going to Party and front organization meetings, but retained his interest in political matters, attending meetings of other left-wing groups. The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Fired by the union for denouncing the pact, Herrick picketed the union hall on 26th Street, his picket-sign reading, 'THE FIRST VICTIM OF THE STALIN-HITLER PACT!'.

Herrick remained a political animal, but much of his energy was absorbed writing novels (encouraged initially by his old friend Natie), a number of which dealt with the Spanish Civil War (the best of which is *Hermanos!*), where he first published many of his revelations about Communist activities. His anger at the Party and its doings never abates, but he doesn't flee into the arms of the Right. His experiences taught him instead to be 'skeptical of all power', and he characterizes himself as an anarcho-social democrat; and I would add a mensch.

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