Book Review
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/£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.
‘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 hoboing 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 ob-
serve 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 anar-
chists and the POUM. But it was the individual acts of injustice, cru-
elty, and political retribution that seemed to have left the strongest
mark on Herrick. There’s an odd tension at this point that Her-
rick 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 re-
tained his interest in political matters, attending meetings of other
left-wing groups. The Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 was the prover-
bial straw that broke the camel’s back. Fired by the union for de-
nouncing 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 demo-
crat; and I would add a mensch.

—Stephen Cole
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