

Book Review: Jumping The Line

Bill Mithoefer

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Jumping The Line: The Adventures And Misadventures Of An American Radical

William Herrick

Reviewed by Bill Mithoefer

If William Herrick never existed, someone would have invented him. His memoir spans a time period from 1915, when he lay in his crib beneath portraits of Trotsky and Lenin in communist, Jewish Trenton, New Jersey to the hell of contradictions in the Spanish Civil War and back. One of Herrick's best qualities is his toughness. Never does the typically American victim complex appear. His brother encounters a glass ceiling at the Metropolitan Insurance Company in 1939. He wonders why he never gets a titled position after consistently coming in first or second in the exams. He changes his Jewish last name Horvitz to Herrick and voila! Promotion. The author points out that it "wasn't that they were anti-Semitic, they just didn't like Jews." He consistently matches socially astute observations with a sort of rambling optimism.

When he is eighteen, Herrick heads off to join Sunrise Cooperative Farm in Saginaw Valley, Michigan. The ideals of the anarchist collective are quite sound. Egalitarian decisions are made at meetings decide the course of the collective. Children follow the examples of their children, and pretty soon, a utopian community is formed. But "there is a worm in this apple, what some call the human equation. In that equation, as Dostoevsky said, two plus two does not equal four." The main problem with Sunrise Cooperative is that the collective is not completely cooperative. J. J. Cohen, editor of *Freie Arbiter Shtimme* (Free Voice of Labor,) a Yiddish Anarchist newspaper funds 75% of the purchase of the co-op. Despite never being elected to be the cooperative's spokesman, leader, president and chairman, his opinions prevail at the weekly "democratic" meetings. As the cooperative progresses, Herrick finds himself elevated to the bourgeois position of driving a tractor. While the other laborers sweat in the fields, he makes long swooping passes with the plow. Eventually, people realize that Cohen is doing very little manual labor and their utopia ends.

Herrick's participation in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War makes up the most interesting and controversial part of his memoir. After a bullet enters his neck in an early battle, he lies around the hospital, eventually getting enough energy to pay regular visits to the whorehouses. He dissects his growing disillusionment with the Communist Party as Stalin's purges begin in Spain. Russian officers suspected of being Trotskyites begin to be killed. The most tension-filled moments of the book span the last half of his stay in Spain as his party loyalties and affiliations are questioned by Communist Party members. Herrick walks a tight-rope trying to figure out who might be testing him and why. The contradictions of war figure heavily in these passages. A particularly heinous officer forces him to spend a harrowing night in his office with a pistol on his table. Our hero eventually pisses himself and ends up having to watch the impromptu execution of three Spanish teenagers, plowing the depths of his conscience over whether he would carry out an execution rather than face his own death.

E.L. Doctorow's *Book Of Daniel* takes us on a fictional account of what happened to the Rosenberg's children after their parents were executed during the Red Scare for allegedly selling U.S. military secrets to the Soviet Union. Herrick provides the backstory for Doctorow's tale, taking us through post-Wobbly New York, a whirlwind of party meetings, short skirts and blunders. His humorous anecdotes capture the social milieu that must have surrounded the Rosenbergs as typically East Coast Jewish communists. Predictably, Herrick goes on to drag Senator Joseph McCarthy over the coals for his role in the Rosenberg's execution. Anyone interested in the hysteria that culminated in the Rosenbergs' execution will find it in Herrick's savagely humorous account.

When all is said and done, William Herrick inspires the reader with tales of a life of integrity and idealism led with a spirit of adventure. The conclusion of his memoir reflects his understated tone throughout. "My mother's silk thread, like Ariadne's, unwinds without breaking. Her life continues. Once as a kid when I came home bawling, having been knocked on my ass in a fight, she said, 'It's better to fight and lose than to live like a vegetable.' I have not lived the life of a vegetable, and, by a long shot, I have not lost."

Jumping The Line is available from AK Press

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