

**Susanne Goga**

**Cigarette girl**

**(Translated from the German by Frances Mossop)**

The sky was blue, very blue. It arched high over the trees like flawless translucent paper. There wasn't a cloud to be seen apart from the small cloud of breath rising in front of her face whenever Rivka exhaled. It was cold. The ground beneath her feet was frozen hard, the black earth covered in a veil of ice. She didn't hear a single bird even though she stood in the middle of a small copse. Perhaps the birds had frozen to death, their corpses dangling upside down from the branches. A strangely amusing image. Rivka glanced upward involuntarily, despite knowing that there'd be no bird hanging above her. She'd been like this even as child. She would imagine the most peculiar things, had odd pictures in her head and depicted them with words for the others, who mostly laughed but sometimes also looked disconcerted.

As a child she had always told funny stories as they worked. There were seven of them: father, mother and five children, who all helped with the rolling. During the day they sat in the cramped living room and made cigarettes. At night the father would set off with his hawker's tray and sell them in the cafés until late at night. The mother would gladly have helped but he said no, that's not possible, you have to stay with the children. And a good thing it was too, because Rivka would not have liked to be alone with her siblings in the dark. The work demanded a great deal of skill. Children's fingers were well suited to the task, that's what the father had said many a time. First they had to glue the paper rolls whilst the mother mixed the tobacco. These were then filled carefully as the delicate paper was not allowed to tear. On a number of occasions Rivka had slipped a damaged paper into her apron pocket to avoid her parents noticing. Not that they would have scolded her or even hit her. But she didn't want to disappoint them. Two Reichsmark for a thousand cigarettes,

this was the kind of money that just had to be earned when there were seven mouths to feed. If they all rolled diligently, they sometimes managed three thousand cigarettes per day.

While Rivka's fingers performed the well rehearsed movements – during which she barely needed to focus – her thoughts were free to wander as they pleased. Most of all she liked to imagine the future of her cigarettes: how a single ready-rolled cigarette found its way into the hawker's tray, which her father would hang around his neck in the evening. How he carried it through the dense hustle and bustle of the Grenadierstraße, away from the dark Spandauer Vorstadt and towards the lights of the Friedrichstraße, where he offered his wares for sale. Here dance restaurants, beer and music-halls and ballrooms competed for space. Her cigarette now lay in the hawker's tray and looked up at the colourful lights, the billboards and street lamps; it could hear the tram-bells and the music escaping from open doors. The laughter of the drunkards, the enticing calls of the prostitutes, in the thick of it the pleading voices of beggars who crouched on the pavement with empty sleeves or trouser legs.

Then her father entered the first café. Mirrors on the walls; a band accompanied the dance, ladies and gents in fine dress circled round the dance floor. Rivka had never been there herself, but she heard the adults' stories and imagined her father's nightly experiences. Most of the guests took no notice of the hunched man in the long coat; some laughed at his long thick beard, which at that time seemed altogether unfashionable. Here men's clean-shaven faces dominated; now and then one could also spot a waxed moustache as sported by the Kaiser. Some held three fingers aloft when they wished to buy three cigarettes, others let their silver cases be filled. This was good business for her father.

Ladies hardly smoked at all those days and certainly not in public, and at most cast a side glance at the small man with his hawker's tray, before taking hold of their champagne glass once again and drinking a toast to their companion.

In one of these either hairy or clean-shaven mouths Rivka's cigarette would also breathe its last in a few burning minutes. How dramatic that sounded, she thought and had to smile. She smiled less often than in former times but her daydreams about the cigarettes made her mouth turn up automatically.

And then the rolling came to an end. Initially all the Russians who'd come to Berlin during the past two years had to leave. New arrivals weren't even permitted to enter the country. There were increasingly fewer people who made cigarettes, then the machines came along which did everything quickly and cheaply and with little manual labour. Her father had found employment at Garbaty in Pankow and although he had a secure income, he had to travel there with the tram. At night he always told them that the machine-made cigarettes were inferior to theirs, that the tobacco crumbled out of the ends. He used to say that no love went into them, which was probably an exaggeration. How was a person meant to roll hundreds of cigarettes every day and then still love them? But Rivka missed sitting around the table with the family and working with her hands whilst letting her mind wander.

Now she had to sit outside under the lime tree in the yard and imagine crazy things. Clouds leap-frogging over each other; dancing cab-horses which swayed to the rhythm of a band on the pavement; rag and bone-men who belted out arias with the voices of opera singers rather than emitting their usual monotonous call across the street; a dignified rabbi juggling with soap bubbles. She remembered Joel Rosenzweig from the house next door who'd always stared over the wall when she sat under the lime-tree. Sometimes he spat cherry stones at her. Her mother just laughed and reckoned it was his way of letting her know that he liked her. But Rivka wasn't sure she believed that. As far as she was concerned a man needed to be able to dream, charm her with stories, or at least listen attentively rather than spit stones.

„You'll soon give up those flights of fancy”, her mother said to her. “If you want to spend your whole life with someone, like your father and me, it'll

take more than painting pretty pictures with words. A marriage cannot live off stories alone.”

Rivka would often secretly stand in front of the mirror, undo her braids and let her hair fall loose over her shoulders. How different she looked then, how much prettier; like a woman able to spin dreams from thoughts. She emerged from the warmth of the memory. How curious, where had all this come from? Oh yes, the birds hanging upside down from the trees.

Now when she thought of her father and his hawkker’s tray she had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from crying. The thought moved her more than the memory of his death. He’d had a good death, peacefully, in his bed.

Then she saw the boots approach, they stopped a short distance from her. A manicured hand, holding a burning cigarette, dangled down the leg, the smoke curling steadily upwards. Her father had never had such clean hands with flawless nails. He’d always called them honest hands.

Rivka leaned her head against the rough bark. Closed her eyes. Saw once more in her mind’s eye the family sitting around the table, her siblings, whose skilled fingers glued and filled the cigarettes. The mother and the bowl in which she mixed the tobacco. She saw her father, who pulled on his long coat, put on his hat with the broad brim and hung around his neck the leather straps of his tiny business.

The cigarette spiralled to the ground. The right boot extinguished it, crushing it on the hard ground.

Then a sharp call sounded out. The children were the first to jump up and run off briskly. They seemed to think it was all a game. The elderly people got up more slowly and moved hesitatingly.

Rivka was the last to follow the group out of the small wood and briefly glanced behind her once more. No, there were no birds hanging upside down from the trees.