

CHAPTER 8

Food



An emergency larder for one person, as suggested by the Ministry of Food in 1942. Included are a number of staples, although not many would have bought their breakfast oats at Harrods. Nor would the scales and bowls look quite so pristine.

It was something I had never seen before – a fresh orange. The orange was peeled, with everyone standing around the table watching. Then, it was carefully divided into segments, and each person got one. First we licked it, so no drop of juice could escape. Then, we took tiny nibbles, letting the juice come slowly into our mouths, and held it there. Don't swallow too fast!

In the food people had available in our period of 1930–60 there appear to be three distinct phases, corresponding pretty much to each decade. In the 1930s, before rationing; in the 1940s both during and after the war when there were severe rationing restrictions of both choice and quantity; and the 1950s, when rationing had more-or-less finished. They are though similar, yet entirely different from today, in one key respect. There was a very restricted range of food available, and self-service supermarkets did not exist. Only a handful of well-off people had fridges, so perishable food went off quickly and shopping expeditions were more frequent. You rarely bought cakes, but the housewife would bake cakes and buns, and make pastry and puddings the hard way. There were no such things as ‘ready meals’ and very little eating out, especially among our contributors. And for fresh produce the year was divided into distinct seasons, seasons which from a shopping viewpoint we’ve almost entirely forgotten. All this made for a limited choice of meals, and a very strong weekly cycle based, for non-Jewish households, on the mandatory Sunday roast.

Our diet was highly predictable – Sunday roast, Monday cold with bubble and squeak, Tuesday shepherd’s pie. Mid-week escapes me, possibly liver and bacon, but Friday was fish, though we were not Catholics. Mum, obsessively hygienic, always wore an apron in the kitchen and often rubber gloves. Yet on liver and bacon days she coated the liver with flour sprinkled onto a newspaper (to keep the worktop clean) with a cigarette drooping from her lips. I longed to see the ash drop onto the meat, but she always seemed to focus at crisis point and tap it into the sink.

On Sundays after lunch nearly all the parents had an afternoon sleep. Most children weren’t allowed out then, but mothers would leave money on the table to buy bagels for Sunday tea.

Sunday dinner was always about 2 o’clock and, of course, it was a roast dinner with ‘afters’. Monday, being washday, was always cold meat, mashed potatoes and greens, then either spotted dick, suet pudding with jam or syrup or milk pudding. My favourite meal was hot eels, mashed potatoes and parsley sauce. I always came home from school at dinner time. Dad came home too.

Sunday roast I loved, though it took an age and we didn’t eat till 3pm. Often I’d sit in the parlour and paint, with the wonderful smell wafting in from the kitchen. My best lunchtime food was stew, with lots of veg and a packet of Edwards’ desiccated soup in it.

Washday Monday, ugh. That washing smell, and cold meat and mash for lunch.

I’m too young to remember what food was like before rationing, and what you haven’t had you don’t miss. The moment I got home from school I’d make myself some bread and dripping, or marge, colourless and greasy stuff that tastes not at all like butter, or today’s you-can’t-tell-the-difference margarine. I much preferred the dripping, though the idea of it now has no appeal whatever. Butter would be wonderful but there was so little of it on the ration that it was strictly off-limits. An apologetic coating of jam, which was also on ration, but bread wasn’t, so I could fill myself up with that.