



## Fish & Chips

**M**y maternal grandmother was born in Finsbury, London in 1891. Her father was a prosperous textile distributor and Dora enjoyed an active social life. She met my grandfather when she was nineteen. They soon married and moved to Mendoza, Argentina, where he was the expat branch manager of the Bank of London and South America. The social life in this small town in the middle of the vast Argentine pampas was nothing like the one Dora had enjoyed in London, and it took her some time to assimilate.

Many years later, when I was a little boy sitting on her lap at her home in Buenos Aires, she was still telling stories about life in London when she was a girl. “Then we came to Mendoza,” she would say, rolling her eyes, “and I missed all the fun of the war.” By that she meant that she had missed all the parties that her friends had given in London during WWI, the charity dances organized “for the war effort.” In her telling, those parties sounded like more fun than I could possibly imagine. But she also told me stories about what the war was like for other people in England, the ones who weren’t dancing the nights away in Kensington. She said that children were sent away from London to stay with relatives or friends or sometimes strangers in the country where, it was assumed, they would be safer. At that point in my life, I had never been away from my parents for a single night, and the thought of being packed off to live with people I didn’t know filled me with dread.

The stories that made the deepest impression on me were about food rationing. In 1918, when the war was over, there was still a desperate shortage of food in England. Everyone was issued a ration book that listed the kind of food they could buy and in what quantities. It was rumoured that even King George and Queen Mary had a ration book. People used their coupons to buy their weekly allotment of food, which might consist of one egg, two ounces of tea, two ounces of butter, one ounce of cheese, eight ounces of

sugar, four ounces of bacon, and four ounces of margarine. Dora marched me into the kitchen and showed me two ounces of butter, eight ounces of sugar, and so on. “Imagine trying to last a week on this,” she said, with one of her usual dramatic gestures.

She explained that Britain struggled to rebuild its economy in the postwar years. Then the Second World War broke out in 1939 and a year later rationing was back. Britons were once again issued ration books and had to use coupons to buy certain hard-to-find things like butter, sugar, and eggs. The government was a little more generous this time, setting weekly rations per person at four ounces of butter, twelve ounces of sugar, four ounces of raw bacon or ham, three-and-a-half ounces of cooked bacon or ham, and two eggs. As the war dragged on, rationing was applied to other kinds of meat, bread, tea, and clothing as well. Children aged five and older were issued their own books; younger children were expected to share their parents’ rations. Dora talked about some of her cousins and friends back home who all had young children at the time and found that shopkeepers occasionally slipped extra food into their shopping bags, on the house. “Being an island helped Britain survive WWII,” she said. “But it also caused problems with the supply of things coming from abroad.” That round of rationing remained in effect until 1954.

Among the few food items that were never subject to rationing during the Second World War were fish and chips. They were considered so essential to the British people’s wellbeing and sense of identity that they were never listed in ration books. Winston Churchill called them “the good companions.” It was feared that if Britons were denied their fish and chips, morale would plummet. So the government protected the fish supply and made sure that potato crops were well taken care of, often by British girls (as shown above) who helped to keep the country going while their men were at war.