



Back In Time

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Alpargatas

I am wearing a pair of dark blue, rope-soled alpargatas. Espadrilles, if you prefer. Shoes made of canvas and jute. They were purchased at a country store in Uruguay for very little money, especially when compared to what designer espadrilles sell for these days. And yet they are priceless because of their sentimental value; you see, I grew up wearing *alpargatas* and they always remind me of my childhood. They were about all I wore on my feet during school holidays in Montevideo in the 1950s. One of the early rituals of summer was the trip to the store to get a new pair. My mother usually took me to the *almacén* near where we lived in Pocitos, and mine were always dark blue and rope-soled, never rubber-soled.

“Aquí tiene, señora. Alpargatas para su botija.”

“Gracias, Paco.”

When they were new the canvas uppers were stiff and the rope soles were firm and a little prickly on the inside and smelled of burlap. The more you wore them, the softer they became and the more they moulded to the shape of your foot. They were ergonomic, eco-friendly, and allowed your feet to breathe comfortably on the hottest summer day. You could flatten the back of the canvas with your heel and make them even easier to slip on and off. Of course, if you got them wet the soles would stiffen up and feel like a couple of planks on your feet, but they could soon be made flexible again with a little bending and twisting. When they were well worn in they were the closest thing there was to going barefoot. My mother used to warn me about the scorching sand at the beach but I would say, “Not to worry, I have *alpargata* feet.”

These simple, unassuming shoes have been around for a long time, some say since the Romans looked at Egyptian sandals and decided to improve on them to protect their feet from the sun and the heat. The fashion spread, and rope-soled shoes have been used for centuries all around the Mediterranean. When the Arabs came to Spain from North Africa in 711 A.D. they brought their language, culture, and architecture—and their *al-barghat*, their hemp sandals, which became *alpargatas* in Andalucía. In his book, “South from Granada” the English writer Gerald Brennan notes the traditional use of *alpargatas* among the people of southern Spain.

In northeastern Spain, the Catalans were probably introduced to the shoe by the Phoenicians and other maritime traders supplying Mediterranean ports from their galleys. The Catalans called the shoes *espartdenya*, a derivation of the local name for the esparto grass that

was used to make the rope soles. This was where the French got their word ‘espadrille.’ They were originally made as peasant footwear and used by farm workers, olive grove tenders, fishermen, and so on. But people also kept a special pair, decorated with ribbons and other motifs, for dancing the *sardana* at fairs and festivals. When vast numbers of Spaniards migrated to the River Plate region of Latin America in the late nineteenth century they took their rope-soled shoes with them. And since much of that early immigration came from Andalucía, Uruguayans and Argentines have always called them *alpargatas*. As distinct from people like my British grandparents, who called them “alpa-garters.”

One day a Basque, Juan Etchegaray and a Scot, Robert Fraser, both immigrants to Argentina, joined forces to produce canvas shoes for the country’s burgeoning workforce. The Sociedad Anónima Fábrica Argentina de Alpargatas was founded in 1885, and expanded to Uruguay in 1890. The company became a household name in the entire Río de la Plata region, its shoes on almost everyone’s feet and its calendar—memorably illustrated by Florencio Molino Campos—on almost everyone’s kitchen wall.

By the early twentieth century, urban Uruguayans were flocking to their beaches, and finding that *alpargatas* were perfect for walking on the sand. It didn’t take them long to see that they were the ideal footwear for children, especially those who could destroy a pair of shoes in a single summer, tearing around on a bicycle or racing around on a beach. Sometimes they were destroyed even sooner, and one would be marched back to the *almacén* to get another pair.

“Here you are, señora. *Alpargatas* for your kid.”

“Thank you, Paco.”

Alpargatas were so much more than just a pair of all-purpose shoes. There was a universal, democratic quality to them that was at its clearest when in the presence of gauchos or construction workers, who seldom wore anything else. And a historical and anthropological quality too, since they are a direct descendent of the footwear that mankind has used since the dawn of time. These are noble shoes that richly deserve an ode of their own:

In halcyon days when beaches beckoned
we braved the summer heat
Protected from the scorching sand
by *alpargata* feet