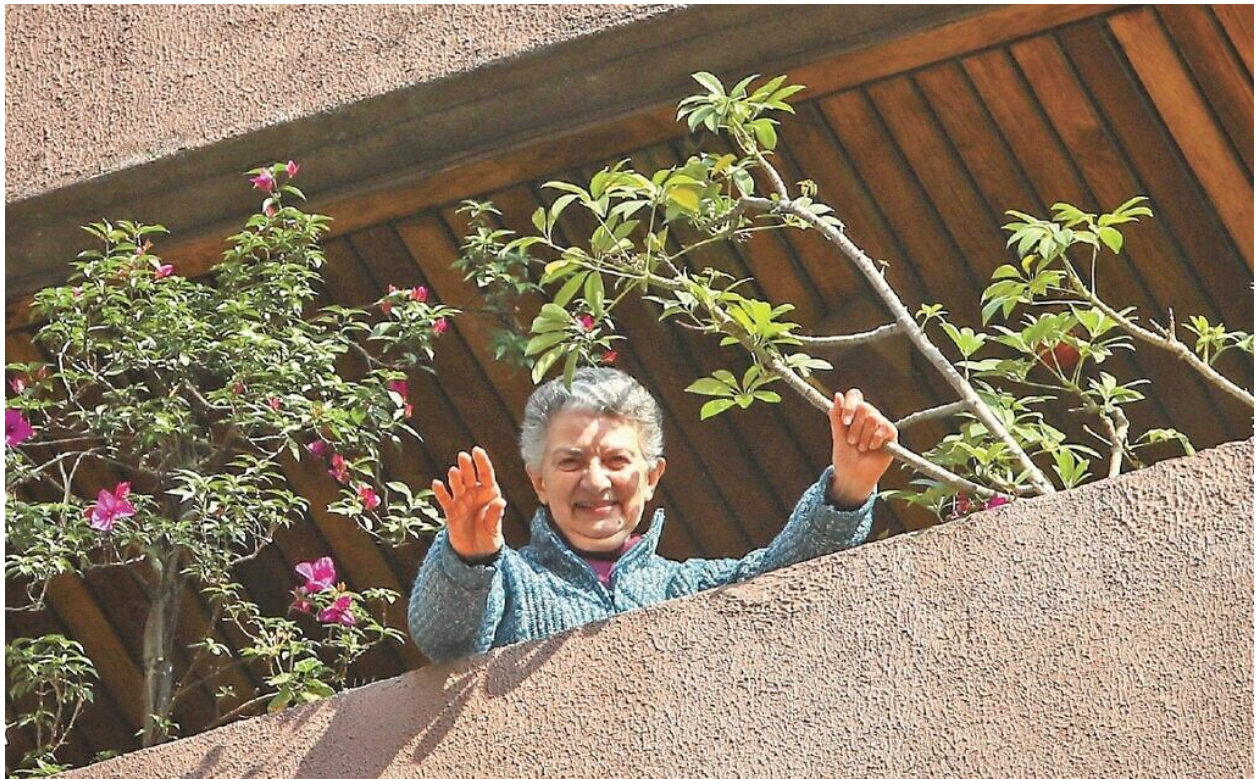


Lauded Mexican writer's novels explore her Sephardic history and crypto-Judaism

Told by her mother that the family were secret Jews, Angelina Muñiz-Huberman often writes about hidden identity, Iberian Jewry, and Jewish mysticism

By [ALAN GRABINSKY](#) 26 December 2021



Angelina Muñiz Huberman is one of a few Jews in the prestigious Mexican Academy of Language. (Courtesy of Huberman/ via JTA)

MEXICO CITY (JTA) — When Angelina Muñiz-Huberman was six years old, her mother shut the main door of their apartment in Mexico City and, whispering as if under persecution, told her that she was descended from Jews.

“She told me that if I ever needed to get recognized by other fellow Jews,” Muñiz-Huberman said, “I should make the sign of the kohanim” — a hand gesture representing an ancient priestly blessing, made famous in a different context by a certain “Star Trek” character.

That moment sparked a keen interest in her family’s Jewish heritage, which would set her on the path to becoming one of Mexico’s best-known novelists on Jewish themes and foremost scholars on Sephardim and crypto-Judaism — people who were forced to renounce or hide their Jewishness in the face of the Spanish Inquisition.

Last month, Muñiz-Huberman, 84, was inducted into Mexico’s most prestigious literary body, the Mexican Academy of Language, which was established decades after Mexican independence to protect and promote Mexican intonations and uses of Spanish.

Earning membership in the 36-chair academic body is a highly selective process in which new members need to be voted in by current ones.

Of the nine women members of the board, four have Jewish ancestry; some, such as the writer Margo Glanz, daughter of the Yiddish poet Jacobo Glanz, have actively dealt with their Jewish ancestry in their most important texts.

But Muñiz-Huberman’s work stands out because of her research on Ladino, an old form of Judeo-Spanish spoken by Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula. Besides being a pioneer in Sephardic studies in Mexico and researching crypto-Jews such as those in her family, Muñiz-Huberman has also focused on mystical Jewish traditions, including kabbalah.

Her academic work often influences her fiction. One of her latest novels, titled “Los Esperandos,” tells the story of Sephardic pirates in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean in the 17th century.

The recipient of multiple awards, including the literary Xavier Villaurutia Prize, Huberman is mainly known for her poetry and novels. One of her most well-known books, “Dulcinea Encantada,” published in 1992, tells the story of one of Don Quixote’s crushes in modern-day Mexico. Stuck inside a car in a traffic jam, the protagonist starts daydreaming and meets fantastical Spanish, Russian, and Mexican characters from throughout history.



Illustrative: The Portuguese town of Belmonte, where many Crypto-Jews were centered. (photo credit: CC BY Ken and Nyetta, Flickr)

Muñiz-Huberman was born in the south of France in 1936. Her father, Alfredo Muñiz, was a Spanish journalist who wrote for the *Heraldo* newspaper in Madrid. When Franco won the Spanish Civil War, her family was forced out of Spain and into France, which they had to flee again in 1939, when the Nazis advanced into the country.

They landed in Cuba and lived in the countryside for a short time before establishing themselves in Mexico. Muñiz-Huberman reminisced about her childhood on the island in her 1995 book “Castles in the Earth,” which she called a “pseudo-memoir” that mixes fact and fiction.

In 1942, they uprooted again to Mexico City, where her father set up an outpost of a medical lab testing company owned by a relative who lived in New York. The family lived among other emigres in the Condesa neighborhood, a hub of Yiddish-speaking middle-class Jews at the time. This is where she learned about her Jewish background.

Her mother Carmen's last name, Sacristán, is not typically Jewish, but according to Huberman, after the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain, many decided to change their last names to sound more Christian, in order to escape persecution.

"These generations of Jews living in Spain maintained a Catholic façade but celebrated Jewish traditions inside the house," Muñiz-Huberman told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

Her first works of fiction use interior monologues to reflect on what it means to hide one's identity. In her first novel, "Morada Interior" (or "Inner Dwelling-Place"), published in 1972, she writes an internal monologue from the point of view of Teresa de Ávila (sometimes called Teresa de Jesus), a Spanish Christian mystic who came from a family of converted Jews. Muñiz-Huberman used pieces from the nun's real diary to fictionalize an account of how she becomes conflicted by her hidden Jewish identity.



Illustrative: A kitchen in the caves of Granada similar to what may have been used by 16th-century crypto-Jews. (Courtesy Marjorie Sandor)

Muñiz-Huberman's husband, Alberto Huberman, was born in Cuba and migrated to Mexico after the Cuban revolution to finish his medical studies. A member of the leftist-Zionist youth group Hashomer Hatzair, he had previously lived in Israel, where he co-founded Kibbutz Gaash.

"He built the houses, the water tower, the whole infrastructure," Muñiz-Huberman said. They married in 1959.

For more than three decades, Muñiz-Huberman has taught courses in Hispano-Hebraic literature in Mexico's National Autonomous University, a behemoth of nearly 250,000 students with a major campus in Mexico City. She said that many of her students, after taking her course, have realized that they also have crypto-Jewish backgrounds, and have undergone formal conversions to Judaism.

Beyond her Jewish side, Muñiz-Huberman also considers herself a representative of the Spanish Exile, a name that refers to so-called "republicanos" who fled Spain's Civil War under the auspices of Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas at the end of the 1940s. These intellectuals and writers have taken important roles within academic bodies like the MAL, and founded liberal education institutions like the Colegio de México.

"In many ways," Muñiz-Huberman said, "I've been through a double exile."

This sense of dislocation and yearning for a once-lost land is present in many of her works, critics have pointed out. She explicitly referenced it in her academy inauguration speech, which was streamed on November 19, 2021.

Muñiz-Huberman talked about the historian Miguel Leon Portilla, whose chair she took in the academy, who devoted his life to studying and portraying the "losing side" of history, especially indigenous cultures conquered by Spaniards.

Both the Jews and Spanish Republicans were on the “losing side” of history, Muñiz-Huberman said. They were both forced to migrate, but both found in their mother tongues solace and strength to carry on.

“Why are we here in this prestigious institution,” she said, “if not for love of... words? Words accompany us in exile, erase our loneliness, establish brotherhood and console us.”

https://www.timesofisrael.com/lauded-mexican-writers-novels-explore-her-sephardic-history-and-crypto-judaism/?utm_source=The+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=daily-edition-2021-12-26&utm_medium=email