

I, Rigoberta Menchú

An Indian woman in Guatemala

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First published as *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú Y Así Me Nació La Conciencia*

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Rigoberta's narration reflects the different influences on her life. It is a mixture of Spanish learned from nuns and full of biblical associations; of Spanish learned in the political struggle replete with revolutionary terms; and, most of all, Spanish which is heavily coloured by the linguistic constructions of her native Quiché and full of the imagery of nature and community traditions.

She has learned the language of the culture which oppresses her in order to fight it—to fight for her people—and to help us understand her own world. In doing so, she has created a form of expression which is full of passion, poetry and wisdom. Sometimes, however, the wealth of memories and associations which come tumbling out in this spontaneous narrative leave the reader a little confused as to chronology and details of events.

The problem of translation was how to retain the vitality, and often beautiful simplicity, of Rigoberta's words, but aim for clarity at the same time. I have tried, as far as possible, to stay with Rigoberta's original phrasing; changing and reordering only where I thought the meaning could not be readily understood. Hence, I've left the repetitions, tense irregularities, and sometimes convoluted sentences which come from Rigoberta's search to find the right expression in Spanish. Words have been left in Spanish or Quiché, where they are objects or concepts for which we have no precise equivalent. The two most obvious words in this category are *ladino* and *compañero*. Although *ladino* ostensibly means a person of mixed race or a Spanish-speaking Indian, in this context it also implies someone who represents a system which oppresses the Indian—first under Spanish rule and then under the succession of brutal governments of the landed oligarchy. So a word like 'half-caste' would be inadequate. Hence Rigoberta's father's invention '*ladinizar*' (to *ladinize*, or become like a *ladino*) which is a mixture of *ladino* and *latinizar* (to latinize), and has both racial and religious connotations. I think it is clear that the word *compañero*, which literally means companion, changes its meaning during the book. Rigoberta initially uses it for her friends, and her neighbours in the community. But as the political commitment of both Rigoberta and her village grows, it becomes 'comrade', a fellow fighter in the struggle. She uses it for the militants in the trade unions, the CUC and the political organisations. The *compañeros de la montana* are the guerrillas. From these two words comes the rather unwieldy *compañero ladino*.

Rigoberta has a mission. Her words want us to understand and react. I only hope that I have been able to do justice to the power of their message. I will have done that if I can convey the impact they had on me when first I read them.

Ann Wright

I THE FAMILY

'We have always lived here: we have the right to go on living where we are happy and where we want to die. Only here can we feel whole; nowhere else would we ever feel complete and our pain would be eternal.'

—Popol Vuh

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.

I must say before I start that I never went to school, and so I find speaking Spanish very difficult. I didn't have the chance to move outside my own world and only learned Spanish three years ago. It's difficult when you learn just by listening, without any books. And, well, yes, I find it a bit difficult. I'd like to start from when I was a little girl, or go back even further to when I was in my mother's womb, because my mother told me how I was born and our customs say that a child begins life on the first day of his mother's pregnancy.

There are twenty-two indigenous ethnic groups in Guatemala, twenty-three including the *mestizos*, or *ladinos* as we call them. Twenty-three groups and twenty-three languages. I belong to one of them—the Quiché people—and I practise Quiché customs, but I also know most of the other groups very well through my work organizing the people. I come from San Miguel Uspantán,¹ in the north-western province of El Quiché. I live near Chajul in the north of El Quiché. The towns there all have long histories of struggle. I have to walk six leagues, or twenty-four kilometres, from my house to the town of Uspantán. The village is called Chimel,² I was born there. Where I live is practically a paradise, the country is so beautiful. There are no big roads, and no cars. Only people can reach it. Everything is taken down the mountainside on horseback or else we carry it ourselves. So, you can see, I live right up in the mountains.

My parents moved there in 1960 and began cultivating the land. No-one had lived up there before because it's so mountainous. But they settled there and were determined not to leave no matter how hard the life was. They'd first been up there collecting the *mimbre* that's found in those parts, and had liked it. They'd started clearing the land for a house, and had wanted to settle there a year later but they didn't have the means. Then they were thrown out of the small house they had in the town and had no alternative but to go up into the mountains. And they stayed there. Now it's a village with five or six *caballerias* of cultivated land.

They'd been forced to leave the town because some *ladino* families came to settle there. They weren't exactly evicted but the *ladinos* just gradually took over. My parents spent everything they earned and they incurred so many debts with these people that they had to leave the house to pay them. The rich are always like that. When people owe them money they take a bit of land or some of their belongings and slowly end up with everything. That's what happened to my parents.

My father was an orphan, and had a very hard life as a child. He was born in Santa Rosa Chucuyub,³ a village in El Quiché. His father died when he was a small boy, leaving the family with a small patch of maize. But when that was finished, my grandmother took her three sons to Uspantán. She got work as a servant to the town's only rich people.

¹ Municipality and administrative centre of the province of El Quiché.

² Centre of the Ixil people. The word also means '*ocote*', in the Quiché language.

³ Hybrid Hispano-Quiché word meaning 'Santa Rosa before the Hill'.

Her boys did jobs around the house like carrying wood and water and tending animals. But as they got bigger, her employer said she didn't work enough for him to go on feeding such big boys. She had to give away her eldest son, my father, to another man so he wouldn't go hungry. By then he could do heavy work like chopping wood or working in the fields but he wasn't paid anything because he'd been given away. He lived with these *ladinos* for nine years but learned no Spanish because he wasn't allowed in the house. He was just there to run errands and work, and was kept totally apart from the family. They found him repulsive because he had no clothes and was very dirty. When my father was fourteen he started looking around for some way out. His brothers were also growing up but they weren't earning anything either. My grandmother earned barely enough to feed them. So my father went off to find work on the *fincas* near the coast. He was already a man and started earning enough money to send to my grandmother and he got her away from that family as soon as he could. She'd sort of become her employer's mistress although he had a wife. She had to agree because she'd nowhere else to go. She did it out of necessity and anyway there were plenty more waiting to take her place. She left to join her eldest son in the coastal estates and the other boys started working there as well.

We grew up on those *fincas* too. They are on the south coast, part of Escuintla, Suchitepequez, Retalhuleu, Santa Rosa, Jutiapa, where coffee, cotton, cardamom and sugar are grown. Cutting cane was usually men's work and the pay was a little higher. But at certain times of the year, both men and women were needed to cut cane. At the beginning things were very hard. They had only wild plants to eat, there wasn't even any maize. But gradually, by working very hard, they managed to get themselves a place up in the *Altiplano*. Nobody had worked the land there before. My father was eighteen by this time and was my grandmother's right arm. He had to work day and night to provide for my grandmother and his brothers. Unfortunately that was just when they were rounding young men up for military service and they took my father off, leaving my grandmother on her own again with her two sons. My father learnt a lot of bad things in the army, but he also learnt to be a man. He said they treated you like an object and taught you everything by brute force. But he did learn how to fight. He was in the army for a long, hard year and when he got back home he found my grandmother was dying. She had a fever. This is very common among people who come from the coast where it's very hot straight to the *Altiplano* where it's very cold. The change is too abrupt for them. There was no money to buy medicine or to care for my grandmother and she died. My father and his brothers were left without parents or any other relatives to help them. My father told me that they had a little house made of straw, very humble, but with their mother dead, there was no point in staying there. So they split up and got work in different parts of the coast. My father found work in a monastery but he hardly earned anything there either. In those days a worker earned thirty to forty *centavos* a day, both in the *fincas* and elsewhere.

That's when my father met my mother and they got married. They went through very difficult times together. They met in the *Altiplano* since my mother was from a very poor family too. Her parents were very poor and used to travel around looking for work. They were hardly ever at home in the *Altiplano*.

That's how they came to settle up in the mountains. There was no town there. There was no-one. They founded a village up there. My village has a long history—a long and painful history. The land up there belonged to the government and you had to get permission to settle there. When you'd got permission, you had to pay a fee so that you could clear the land and then build your house. Through all my parents' efforts in the *fincas*, they managed to get enough money together to pay the fee, and they cleared the land. Of course, it's not very easy to make things grow on land that's just been cleared. You don't get a good yield for at least eight or nine years. So my parents cultivated the land and eight years later, it started to produce. We were growing up during this period. I had five older brothers and sisters. I saw my two eldest brothers die from lack of food when we were down in the *fincas*. Most Indian families suffer from malnutrition. Most of them don't even reach fifteen years old. When children are growing and don't get enough to eat, they're often ill, and this...well...it complicates the situation.

So my parents stayed there. My mother found the trees and our amazing mountains so beautiful. She said that they'd get lost sometimes because the mountains were so high and not a single ray of light fell through the plants. It's very dense. [...]

I was born there. My mother already had five children, I think. Yes, I had five brothers and sisters and I'm the sixth. My mother said that she was working down on a *finca* until a month before I was born. She had just twenty days to go when she went up to the mountains, and she gave birth to me all on her own. My father wasn't there because he had to work the month out on the *finca*.

Most of what I remember is after I was five. We spent four months in our little house in the *Altiplano* and the rest of the year we had to go down to the coast, either in the *Boca Costa*⁴ where there's coffee picking and also weeding out the coffee plants, or further down the south coast where there's cotton. [...] So we'd work in the *fincas* for eight months and in January we'd go back up to the *Altiplano* to sow our crops. Where we live in the mountains—that is, where the land isn't fertile—you can barely grow maize and beans. The land isn't fertile enough for anything else. But on the coast the land is rich and you can grow anything. After we'd sown our crops, we'd go down to the coast again until it was time to harvest them, and then we'd make the journey back again. But the maize would soon run out, and we'd be back down again to earn some money. From what my parents said, they lived this harsh life for many years and they were always poor.

⁴ Name given to the western slope of the Sierra Madre going down to the Pacific Ocean.

VI
AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD AGRICULTURAL WORKER

'And that's when my consciousness was born.'

—Rigoberta Menchú

I worked from when I was very small, but I didn't earn anything. I was really helping my mother because she always had to carry a baby, my little brother, on her back as she picked coffee. It made me very sad to see my mother's face covered in sweat as she tried to finish her workload, and I wanted to help her. But my work wasn't paid, it just contributed to my mother's work. I either picked coffee with her or looked after my little brother, so she could work faster. My brother was two at the time. Indian women prefer to breastfeed their babies rather than give them food because, when the child eats and the mother eats, that's duplicating the food needed. So my brother was still feeding at the breast and my mother had to spend time feeding him and everything. [...]

I was five when she was doing this work and I looked after my little brother. I wasn't earning yet. I used to watch my mother, who often had the food ready at three o'clock in the morning for the workers who started work early, and at eleven she had the food for the midday meal ready. At seven in the evening she had to run around again making food for her group. In between times, she worked picking coffee to supplement what she earned. Watching her made me feel useless and weak because I couldn't do anything to help her except look after my brother. That's when my consciousness was born. It's true. My mother didn't like the idea of me working, of earning my own money, but I did. I wanted to work, more than anything to help her, both economically and physically. The thing was that my mother was very brave and stood up to everything well, but there were times when one of my brothers or sisters was ill—if it wasn't one of them it was another—and everything she earned went on medicine for them. This made me very sad as well. It was that time, I remember, that when we went back to the *Altiplano* after five months in the *finca*, I was ill and it looked as if I'd die. I was six and my mother was distressed because I nearly died. The change of climate was too abrupt for me. After that, though, I made a big effort not to get ill again and, although my head ached a lot, I didn't say so.

When I turned eight, I started to earn money on the *finca*. I set myself the task of picking thirty-five pounds of coffee a day. In those days, I was paid twenty *centavos* for that amount. If I picked the thirty-five pounds, I earned twenty *centavos* a day, but if I didn't, I had to go on earning those same twenty *centavos* the next day. So I set myself this task and I remember that my brothers and sisters finished work at about seven or eight in the evening and sometimes offered to help me, but I said; 'No, I have to learn because if I don't learn myself, who's going to teach me?' I had to finish my workload myself. Sometimes I picked barely twenty-eight pounds because I got tired, especially when it was very hot. It gave me a headache. I'd fall asleep under a coffee bush, when suddenly I'd hear my brothers and sisters coming to look for me.

In the mornings we'd take turns to go off into the scrub and do our business. There are no toilets in the *finca*. There was only this place up in the hills where everybody went. There were about four hundred of us living there and everyone went to this same place. It was the toilet for all those people. We had to take it in turns. When one lot of people came back, another lot would go. There were lots of flies on all that filth up there. [...]

Coffee is picked from the branch, but sometimes when it was ripe and fell off the branch, we'd have to collect it up off the ground. It's more difficult to pick up than pick from the branch. Sometimes we have to move the bushes to get at the coffee. We have to pick the nearest beans very carefully—bean by bean—because if we break a branch we have to pay for it out of our wages. It's worse when the coffee bushes are young. The branches are more valuable than on the old bushes. That's the job of the overseer, watching how the workers pick the coffee and seeing if they damage the leaves. We had to work very carefully. We learned that very early in our lives. [...]

It was during this period, when I was eight, that I fell ill. I'd been in the *finca* barely three months when I became ill and we had to go back home. It was in March, the time when we had to go back to the *Altiplano* anyway to sow our maize. So we went back and that's when I began working with my parents in the fields as well. It was another life, life in the fields—we were much happier. Although things were hard there too, because it rains a lot in the mountains and we were always wet. Our house was very draughty, we were never out of the wind, and the animals came into the house whenever they wanted. It meant we were never comfortable, and we were never warm because we didn't have clothes.

We went down to the *finca* again. It was round about May. My father went to cut cane on another plantation, one of my brothers went to pick cotton, and the rest of us stayed on the coffee plantation. When my father worked nearby he used to come back and stay, but when we worked on another *finca* we wouldn't see him until the end of the month. It was like that most of the time, with my father cutting, sowing or cleaning cane somewhere else. My father usually worked in sugar and the rest of us in coffee. So we were in different *fincas*. Sometimes we saw each other every month and sometimes every three months.

When my parents came back from work, they were very tired. My father, for instance, used to get very, very tired and he often didn't feel like talking or telling us anything. My mother didn't either. [...] Mothers are very tired and just can't do it. This is where you see the situation of women in Guatemala very clearly. Most of the women who work picking cotton and coffee, or sometimes cane, have nine or ten children with them. Of these, three or four will be more or less healthy, and can survive, but most of them have bellies swollen from malnutrition and the mother knows that four or five of her children could die. This is a terrible situation and makes the men want to rebel, but they just try and forget because there is no other way out. So it's the mother who has to be with her children during their final moments. Suffering is everywhere. Women show a great deal of courage faced with this whole situation. Another thing that happens is that men who've been in the army, for example, often abuse young girls. Many girls have no families and earn only the little they get in the *finca*, so you start getting prostitution. This is something that doesn't exist among Indians, because of our culture and the traditions we preserve and respect. In the eyes of our community, the fact that anyone should even change the way they dress shows a lack of dignity. Anyone who doesn't dress as our grandfathers, our ancestors, dressed, is on the road to ruin.

XIV
A MAID IN THE CAPITAL

'I was incapable of disobedience. And those employers exploited my obedience. They took advantage of my innocence.'

—Rigoberta Menchú

When we left the *finca*, the landowner's guards travelled behind him. And they were armed. I was terrified! But I told myself, 'I must be brave, they can't do anything to me.' My father said: 'I don't know if anything will happen to you, my child, but you are a mature woman.'

So we reached the capital. I remember that my clothes were worn out because I'd been working in the *finca*: my *corte* was really dirty and my *huipil* very old. I had a little *perraje*, the only one I owned. I didn't have any shoes. I didn't even know what wearing shoes was like. The master's wife was at home. There was another servant girl to do the cooking and I would have to do all the cleaning in the house. The other servant was also Indian, but she'd changed her clothes. She wore *ladino* clothes and already spoke Spanish. I didn't know any; I arrived and didn't know what to say. I couldn't speak Spanish but I understood a little because of the *finca* overseers who used to give us orders, bully us and hand out the work. Many of them are Indians but they won't use Indian languages because they feel different from the labourers. So I understood Spanish although I couldn't speak it. The mistress called the other servant: 'Take this girl to the room in the back.' The girl came, looked at me with indifference and told me to follow her. She took me to the other room. It was a room with a pile of boxes in the corner and plastic bags where they kept the rubbish. It had a little bed. They took it down for me and put a little mat on it, with another blanket, and left me there. I had nothing to cover myself with.

The first night, I remember, I didn't know what to do. That was when I felt what my sister had felt although, of course, my sister had been with another family. Then later the mistress called me. The food they gave me was a few beans with some very hard *tortillas*. There was a dog in the house, a pretty, white, fat dog. When I saw the maid bring out the dog's food—bits of meat, rice, things that the family ate—and they gave me a few beans and hard *tortillas*, that hurt me very much. The dog had a good meal and I didn't deserve as good a meal as the dog. Anyway, I ate it, I was used to it. I didn't mind not having the dog's food because at home I only ate *tortillas* with chile or with salt or water. But I felt rejected. I was lower than the animals in the house. [...]

At three in the morning, I said: 'My God, my parents will be working and I'm here.' But I also thought, I must learn, and then go home. I always said that I must go home. Three o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock. At seven, the girl got up and came and told me: 'Come here and wash the dishes.' I went in my same clothes and the mistress came in and said; 'How filthy! get that girl out of here! How can you let her touch the dishes, can't you see how dirty she is?' The girl told me to leave the dishes, but she was upset too. 'Here's the broom, go and sweep up,' the mistress said. I went out to sweep the yard. 'Water the plants,' she said, 'that's your job. And then come here and do the washing. Here are the clothes, but mind you wash them properly or I'll throw you out.'

Of course, I was in the city but I didn't know the first thing about it. I knew nothing about the city even though I'd been there with my father. But then we'd only gone to one place and to some offices. I didn't know how to find my way around and I couldn't read the numbers or the streets. [...]

And that was when I discovered the truth in what my grandmother used to say: that with rich people even their plates shine. Well, yes, even their toilets shine. At home we don't even have one. I was really very distressed, remembering all my parents' and my grandparents' advice. I learned to dust, wash and iron very quickly. I found ironing the hardest because I'd never used an iron before. I remember how the washing and ironing used to pile up. The landowner had three children and they changed their clothes several times a day. All the clothes they left lying around had to be washed again, and ironed again, and then hung up in the right place. The mistress used to watch me all the time and was very nasty to me. She treated me like.. I don't know what...not like a dog because she treated

the dog well. She used to hug the dog. So I thought: 'She doesn't even compare me with the dog.' They had a garden and I sowed some plants. I used to do this at home so I got on really well with that. That's what I saw every day. The time came when I was working really well. I did all my jobs in a trice. I didn't find it difficult. I had to work for the two months that the mistress spent on my clothes without earning a *centavo*. [...]

The sons of the house treated us very badly. One must have been about twenty-two, the next about fifteen, and the youngest about twelve. They were petty bourgeois youths who couldn't even pick a duster up, or clear anything away. They liked throwing their dishes in our faces. That was our job. They threw things at us, they shouted at us all the time, and treated us very badly. [...]

There were times when we'd really had enough. One day the other maid and I agreed we'd start being difficult. She said: 'If the mistress complains, let her complain.' And we stopped doing certain things just to annoy her. So she got up and shouted at us, but the more she shouted the more stubborn we became and she saw that that wasn't any use. The other maid said: 'Come on, let's leave and find another job.' But I was worried because I couldn't just decide like that; I didn't know the city and if I counted on her, she might take me somewhere worse. What was I to do? Soon I realized that the mistress spurned this girl because she wouldn't become the boys' lover. She told me later: 'That old bag wants me to initiate her sons. She says boys have to learn how to do the sexual act and if they don't learn when they're young, it's harder for them when they're older. So she put in my contract that she'd pay me a bit more if I taught her sons.' That was the condition she'd imposed, and that was why she was so hard on the girl: because she'd refused. Perhaps she nursed the hope that one day I'd be clean—she always said I was dirty—so that one day I'd be all right to teach her sons. That's what she hoped, that lady. She mistreated me and rejected me, but she didn't actually throw me out. [...]

[...] They were very grand people. We couldn't address them as '*tu*' at all, we had to use '*usted*' all the time, out of respect. Anyway, once when I was just starting to learn and was finding Spanish very hard, perhaps I might have used '*tu*' to the mistress. She almost hit me. She said, 'Call your mother "*tu*". Me, you treat with respect.' Of course, this wasn't difficult to understand because I knew we're always treated like this. It made me laugh sometimes, but as a human being, these things hurt. I used to go out with the other maid but I tried to keep the little I was earning. I was pleased because I now understood Spanish very well. But since nobody taught me to memorize word by word, I couldn't say a lot. I could say the main things I needed for my work but I couldn't start a conversation, or answer back, or protest about something. [...]

December passed. And I went on working. All the work from Christmas set me back by two weeks. All the new clothes and all the new china they'd got out just piled up. The house was dirty. I had to do everything. The mistress pretended she didn't notice. She'd get up and go out. She didn't even complain so much, because she knew she needed me to do it all. That's when I thought: 'I must get out of this house. I must go home to my parents.' She gave me two months' money. It was forty *quetzals*. With this and with what I'd already saved, I thought, I can go home to my parents satisfied. It wasn't very much, perhaps, but it would help them. I told the mistress: 'I'm leaving. I'm going home.' She said: 'No, how can you? We're so fond of you here. You must stay. I'll put your wages up, if you like. I'll give you a *quetzal* more.' 'No,' I said, 'I've made up my mind to go.' I was announcing my departure, unfortunately. I say unfortunately because a terrible thing happened: one of my brothers arrived and said: 'Papá is in prison.'

XV
CONFLICT WITH THE LANDOWNERS AND THE CREATION OF THE CUC⁵

'Gather in your grain and seeds and collect the young shoots, because times of drought and hunger are approaching. Sharpen your weapons because it will not be long before enemies, hidden behind mountains and hills, will espy with greed the expanse and richness of these lands.'

—Popol Vuh

This was the first time my father went to prison. My brother said, 'We don't know what to do for him because the lawyers say Papá will be in jail for eighteen years. We need money to get educated people to help us.' In Guatemala this is what happens with the poor, especially Indians, because they can't speak Spanish. The Indian can't speak up for what he wants. When they put my father in jail, the landowners gave large amounts of money to the judge there. The judge in El Quiché, that is. There are several levels of authority. First, there is the military commissioner. He sometimes lives in the villages or is based in the town, and he tries to impose his own law. Then there is what we call the mayor who represents the authorities that administer justice when they say someone has broken the law. Next come the governors who govern the whole region, each province. And finally, there are the deputies—God knows who they are! To get to see the military commissioner, you first have to give him a *mordida*, that's what we call a bribe in Guatemala. To see the mayor, you have to get witnesses, sign papers and then give him a *mordida* so he will support your case. To see the governor you need not only witnesses from the village, and money, but also lawyers or other intermediaries to talk for you. The governor is a *ladino* and doesn't understand the language of the people. He'll only believe something if a lawyer or educated person says it. He won't accept anything from an Indian. The mayor is a *ladino* too. But he's a *ladino* who's come from our people. The military commissioner is also a *ladino* although this varies a bit, because in some places the commissioners are Indians who have done military service and lived in the barracks. There comes a time when they return to their village, brutalized men, criminals.

My father fought for twenty-two years, waging a heroic struggle against the landowners who wanted to take our land and our neighbours' land. After many years of hard work, when our small bit of land began yielding harvests and our people had a large area under cultivation, the big landowners appeared: the Brols. It's said there that they were even more renowned criminals than the Martínez and García families, who owned a *finca* there before the Brols arrived. The Brols were a large family, a whole gang of brothers. Five of them lived on a *finca* they had taken over by forcibly throwing the Indians of the region off their land.

That was what happened to us. We lived in a small village. We cultivated maize, beans, potatoes and all sorts of vegetables. Then the Garcías arrived and started measuring the land in our village. They brought inspectors, engineers and Heaven knows who else; people they said were from the government. In Guatemala if it's to do with the government, there's no way we can defend ourselves. So they came and started measuring our land. My father went round collecting signatures in the village, and they held meetings. Then he went to the capital, to the INTA, *Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria de Guatemala*: Guatemalan National Institute for Agrarian Transformation. But the landowners and the government had made a deal to take the peasants' land away from them. When my father went to protest about the way the landowners were forcing us off our land, the people in the INTA asked the landowners for money to be allowed to go on measuring. On the other hand, they gave the peasants a piece of paper which, according to them, said they didn't have to leave their land. It was a double-sided game. They called my father in. Papá used to be...well, I don't mean foolish exactly because it's the thieves who steal our land who are foolish.... Well, they asked my father to sign a paper but he didn't know what it said because he'd never learned to read or write. In fact, the paper said that the peasants confirmed, once again, that they would leave their land. This gave the landowners power, since he, the community's representative, had signed the paper. My father went back again to protest, this time through some lawyers. The INTA people and the lawyers started getting fat off us. Many lawyers wanted to help us and offered us different sorts of help. They said we were doing the right

⁵ Comité de Unidad Campesina—United Peasant Committee.

thing. The peasants trusted them but realized afterwards that they made them pay through the nose, even for a simple signature. My father dedicated himself entirely to our community's problems. The INTA told my father: 'You must get engineers to measure the land and then you'll be the owners of the land you live on. Don't worry, grow what you want. Don't worry, go ahead and clear the undergrowth because the land is yours.' With this encouragement, my father went home and called meetings in the village.

We were very happy and went on working until the landowners arrived with their engineers again. Our little bit of land has probably been measured something like twenty times, if I'm not mistaken. Engineers after engineers. What I can't forgive, and this is something that has contributed to my hate for these people, is that they said they came to help us. My father, mother, all the community, were very distressed. They were *ladinos*. They couldn't eat our food, our *tortillas* with salt. If we didn't feed them well they would probably favour the landowners. So we treated them very well, out of fear. We gave them our best, our fattest animals. We'd kill chickens for them to eat. Our community, which never bought so much as a bottle of oil, had to buy them rice, oil, eggs, chickens, meat. We had to buy coffee and sugar, because they couldn't eat *panela*. Our community never ate these things. We all had to go to town. The village got together, gave in their ten *centavos* and with this collection we bought what was needed. Earning ten *centavos* is hard for us, it's earned by a lot of sweat. It was worse when the inspectors stayed a whole week. When they left, the village breathed a sigh of relief and we were much poorer. *We* didn't eat meat. *They* did. They got their information with no difficulty. They went to the further points of our land and, of course, needed someone to go with them. But our people have no time to spare. It was my father who gave up his time because he loved the community, even if it meant we often had nothing to eat at home. My mother felt responsible for looking after these men. She saw how in need our neighbours were. So my mother stayed at home and said to us, 'You children go and work because I have to attend to these men.' My parents attended to them because, as leaders of the community, it was their responsibility—they were the most important people in the village. They looked after them very well. My mother even made them small *tortillas* because they couldn't eat our large ones. She had to make ones to suit them. So neither of my parents could work while those men were there. Our neighbours contributed what they could, but they didn't have very much. We couldn't speak Spanish. My father spoke a little, just enough to understand the inspectors. The INTA used to send for him. They sometimes made him go to Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, El Quiché or to the capital just to sign a piece of paper. You can imagine the cost of those journeys in food and transport. And on top of all this, we had to pay the lawyers who shuffle the papers.

The government says the land belongs to the nation. It owns the land and gives it to us to cultivate. But when we've cleared and cultivated the land, that's when the landowners appear. However, the landowners don't just appear on their own—they have connections with the different authorities that allow them to maneuver like that. Because of this, we faced the Martínez family, the Garcías, and then the Brols arrived. This meant we could either stay and work as *peónes* or leave our land. There was no other solution. So my father travelled all over the place seeking advice. We didn't realize then that going to the government authorities was the same as going to the landowners. They are the same. My father was tireless in his efforts to seek help. He went to other sectors, like the workers' unions. He asked them to help because we were already being thrown off our land.

The first time they threw us out of our homes was, if I remember rightly, in 1967. They turned us out of our houses, and out of the village. The Garcías' henchmen set to work with ferocity. They were Indians too, soldiers of the *finca*. First they went into the houses without permission and got all the people out. Then they went in and threw out all our things. I remember that my mother had her silver necklaces, precious keepsakes from my grandmother, but we never saw them again after that. They stole them all. They threw out our cooking utensils, our earthenware cooking pots. We don't use those sort of...special utensils, we have our own earthenware pots. They hurled them into the air, and, oh God! they hit the ground and broke into pieces. All our plates, cups, pots. They threw them out and they all broke. That was the vengeance of the landowner on the peasants because we wouldn't give up our land. [...]

Those few days confirmed my hatred for those people. I saw why we said that *ladinos* were thieves, criminals and liars. It was as our parents had told us. We could see that they were doing the same to us. They killed our animals. They killed many of our dogs. To us, killing an animal is like killing a person. We care for all the things of the natural

world very much and killing our dogs wounded us very deeply. We spent more than forty days in the fields. Then the community held a meeting and said, 'If they throw us out again, we will die of hunger.' We had no utensils for cooking our *tortillas*, and no grinding stones. They'd been thrown away into the undergrowth. We organized ourselves, all of us, and said, 'Let's collect our things together.' We went looking for any of our things that were still more or less all right. My father said, 'If they kill us they kill us, but we'll go back to our houses.' Our people looked on my father as their own father, and so we went back to our houses. There was another village quite near ours and they helped us. People brought cooking pots and plates so that we could cook our maize and eat. So we went back to our houses. And the landowners came back again for what they called 'collective negotiations.' They told us we should resign ourselves to working as *peónes* because the land belonged to them. We could stay in our houses, but the land was not ours. If we didn't agree, they would throw us off again. But my father said: 'We were the first families to come and cultivate this land and nobody can deceive us into thinking that this land is theirs. If they want to be the owners of more land, let them go and cultivate the mountains. There is more land but it is not land where things grow.' [...]

We love our land very much. Since those people tried to take our land away, we have grieved very much. My grandfather used to cry bitterly and say: 'In the past, no one person owned the land. The land belonged to everyone. There were no boundaries.' We were sadder still when we saw our animals going hungry because of us. If our animals went near our crops, they were killed by the Garcías' henchmen who were guarding them. (I remember that the wickedest landowner was Honorio García. The other was Angel Martínez.) My grandfather said, 'If they kill our animals, we must kill them.' That was the idea that came to my grandfather. We spent about fifteen days away from our house, after the second raid and our elders advised us to burn them and leave. But where to? We didn't know whether it was better to go to the *finca* or agree to be labourers on the landowners' estate. We couldn't decide. We discussed it with all our neighbours. Among the whole community. During all this time we couldn't celebrate our culture; none of our ceremonies. That's when my father took his stand. He said, 'If they kill me for trying to defend the land that belongs to us, well, they'll have to kill me.' [...]

My father went on travelling. He was hardly ever at home now. He didn't pay us much attention, or talk to us like he used to. He'd arrive, call a meeting of the community, talk to them and then sometimes leave the next day. We began to lose contact with him. When the landowners saw my father working so hard to save our land, they started threatening him. So he said, 'The best guardians, the best protection a man has, are his animals. Our dogs must learn to defend us.' We had some good dogs, they were very fierce. We spent time teaching the dogs to bite those men when they came to our houses—sometimes in the middle of the night.

Our life was now such that we couldn't go down to the *finca* because if we did our houses probably wouldn't be there when we got back. The community decided to eat plants or whatever they could find in the fields rather than go down to the *finca*. Or part of a family would go and the other part would stay and watch over the house. We became much more united. When the landowners came we'd unite so that they either had to throw us all off, kill us all or leave us alone. We began teaching the children to keep watch and tell us when the landowners were coming. We lived for quite a while like this—with all this tension. I kept on going down to the *finca* with my brothers and sisters. My mother always stayed in the house. Or my father was there. My father never went down to the *fincas* because the landowners would take advantage of this and go into the village. Then they started trying other things. We had maize and beans but we had to carry all our produce down from the village to the town which was a long way away. So the landowners set up a temporary market, a place to sell produce, and tried to isolate us from the town even more, so that they could take over our land more easily.

Then the INTA came and told us that the problem was solved. They said: 'We're going to give you a title to the land for you to sign and the land will be yours. No-one will bother you on your land. You can sow your crops, clear the undergrowth and go further into the mountains. This proposal comes from the government.' We signed it. I remember even the children signed it. We can't sign with a pen or a pencil. We signed it in ink with our fingerprints on the paper. My father insisted they read the paper out even though we didn't understand it all. We did understand

some. But they didn't want to read it. The INTA inspectors said we could rely on the paper, it was the title to the land. So we signed it.

They left us alone for two and a half years, I think it was, to let us calm down. Our people went on working. We hardly ever went down to the *finca* now so that we could cultivate more land. We tried to clear large areas of the undergrowth, into the mountains. We had a dream, a real dream. In five or eight years our land would yield its fruit. Two and a half years went by when we saw the engineers on our land again, shouting, measuring, with the landowners' guards. Now, not only the Martínez and the Garcías, but the Brols were all measuring part of our land. This time the problem was more complicated because they brought with them the document we had signed, which said we had agreed to stay on the land and live off its produce for two years only; that when the two years were up, we had another place to go to and would leave the land. This wasn't true. We didn't know what it was we had signed. My father said, 'This is unjust, because we were deceived.'

This is how my father started getting more deeply involved with the unions. I remember my father asked some unions in the FASGUA, *Federación Autónoma Sindical de Guatemala*—Guatemalan Federation of Independent Unions—to help us because they were unions for workers, for labourers, and we were peasants—agricultural labourers. The unions helped us a lot. They said they would denounce the fact that we were being thrown off our land. My father was continually going to see the unions, the INTA, the lawyers. It nearly drove him mad. He told us, 'My children, you must get to know the places I go to because otherwise, if they kill me the community will lose its land.' Very well. One of my older brothers began to travel with my father and began learning Spanish. The community had to contribute to my father's fares. He very often had no money at all and my mother had to sell our animals to pay for his trips. But at least we didn't leave our land. My mother thought about us more and more because, of course, they were growing up. They wondered how much their children would suffer afterwards. The whole community wondered.

When my father started going to the unions and getting their support, the landowners offered a great deal of money to the judge who dealt with land claims, and my father was arrested. They accused him of 'compromising the sovereignty of the state.' He was endangering the 'sovereignty and the well-being of the Guatemalans!' They put him in prison. I remember that I'd been working as a maid for a year. I'd saved a little money to take home as a surprise for my family, especially my mother. I'd saved it so that my mother wouldn't have to go to the *finca* for a couple of months. My brother told me: 'They're asking for money. We don't know what to do.' I decided to leave my job and go back to the *finca*. From the money I'd saved and my brothers' wages in the *finca*, we had to pay for witnesses, lawyers, documents, secretaries. There were so many things we had to pay for to be able to get to see the authorities. Since we didn't speak Spanish, we had to find an intermediary to translate my mother's statements. The lawyer was a *ladino* and didn't understand our language, so we had to get an intermediary to interpret for him. From the beginning the landowners paid the interpreter not to say what we said. The interpreter 'sold himself' to the landowners and, instead of our statements, he said something else. They played so many tricks on us. The result was that our lawyer had nothing to do because, according to the interpreter, we ourselves acknowledged that the land belonged to those landowners. They had paid us to cultivate the land. That wasn't true. We were very afraid that they would send my father to the state prison. As long as he was in the local prison, his case wasn't so serious, but once he got to the state prison, the one in El Quiché, we'd have no way of preventing him from having to carry out the sentence he'd been given. If he went to the criminals' prison, as the authorities in Quetzaltenango said, it meant he would be in jail for eighteen years or more. [...]

[...] They made my father make an endless stream of statements. Every five days they took him before the judge and asked him the same things to see if he'd changed his mind or changed the statement justifying his case. That is to say, the judges had no valid justification, so they were looking for something to appease the landowners. The landowners arrived with more and more money to pressurize the judges into 'selling' my father and keeping him in prison like a criminal. We were very unhappy because we didn't see our mother or our father as we were working all the time in the *finca*.

In the end, we managed to get him out. Papá was in prison for a year and two months. His enemies were furious when he came out. He came out so happy and determined to fight. He said: 'Our ancestors were never cowardly. And prison doesn't eat people. Prison is a punishment for the poor, but it doesn't eat people. I must go home and go on fighting.' He didn't rest for a minute. That's how he maintained his contacts with the unions and gained their support. [...]

My father was away travelling for three months after he got out of prison. Then they kidnapped him and we said, 'They'll have finished him off.' In those days, they were criminals, but a different sort. The landowners' henchmen kidnapped my father near our house on the path going to town. One of my brothers was with him as we hardly ever let him go alone after they'd threatened so often to kill him. We were worried. So even if it meant less work, it was better for the community if someone went with him. He always went with a neighbour or one of his children. My brother escaped and immediately mobilized the whole village. They couldn't take him very far because we cut off the paths right away. We used weapons, our everyday weapons, for the first time. The people took machetes, sticks, hoes and stones to fight the guards. They would have beaten or killed any of them, they were so angry. Around midday we found my father. He'd been tortured and abandoned. There was no sign of the torturers but we knew they were the landowners' guards. My father was on the ground. They had torn off the hair on his head on one side. His skin was cut all over and they'd broken so many of his bones that he couldn't walk, lift himself or move a single finger. He looked as if he was dying. It was almost unbearable for us. The community made him one of those chairs the people use for carrying their wounded and we took him down to the town. He was almost cold. He was almost dead when we arrived at the health centre but they wouldn't attend to him there because the landowners had got there before us and paid them not to look after my father. They'd given the doctors money so none of them would see my father. All the doctors were *ladinos*. So my mother had to call an ambulance from Santa Cruz del Quiché, which took him to a hospital called San Juan de Dios in El Quiché. He arrived there half dead. They gave him serum and said he'd have to stay there for about nine months for some of the very badly damaged parts of his body to heal. They'd broken many of his bones and he was an old man so they wouldn't mend quickly. More bitterness for my mother. She had to go to El Quiché and look after my father. She worked there to pay for his medicine and some special care.

My brothers and sisters decided not to go down to the *finca* now. They said: 'From now on we'll stay here, even if we starve to death, because we have to cultivate our land. We'll try and grow enough crops to live on and not go to the *finca*.' My mother used to come once every fifteen days perhaps. She'd stay a day and then go back. We had a little sister and we looked after her so that my mother didn't have to take her with her. Some neighbours had a little goat which gave milk. We gave her goat's milk because we didn't have any cows. My little sister was about one and a half then. Later on we received another threat. A message came saying that they were going to kidnap my father from the hospital. The community was frightened and said it would be better for him to come home and be looked after here where they couldn't kidnap him. We told my mother straight away. One of my brothers went to El Quiché to warn her about the message we'd received. With the help of the priests and nuns, who gave us money, we put my father in a secret place where the landowners couldn't find him. He was in the hospital of San Juan de Dios for six months and in the other place for another five months. After that he came home but he was in so much pain that he was never his old self again. He couldn't carry things; he couldn't walk very well and it was a big effort for him to walk to the town. At night he couldn't sleep because his bones ached and all the parts where he'd been beaten hurt him. [...]

Then in 1977, my father was put in prison again. They wouldn't leave us in peace. After my father came out of hospital and returned home, they kept on threatening him because they knew as long as the community was united they couldn't send their engineers to the villages. We would use machetes or stones. So they went on threatening my father and said they were going to catch him on the road again and kill him. But my father said: 'They are cowards, they just talk, they never do it.' But it worried us a lot because it would be very difficult for us if they did. That was when my father started advising us not to put our trust in him alone but in the whole community. 'I'm your father now,' he said, 'but afterwards the community will be your father.' He went on travelling and refused to keep quiet. He went on doing his work. It was in 1977 that they arrested him again and sent him to prison.

I was learning some Spanish at the time with the priests and nuns. I used to travel too. The priests helped me to go to the capital and stay with the nuns in a convent for a few days. When my father came out of hospital, I started travelling with him too, to get to know the circles he moved in. We were already thinking about my father's death. They could kill him any minute, so we needed to know where it was he went. I began accompanying him all the time. The community, the priests and some friends of my father helped us. Some Europeans were helping us too. They sent us a lot of money. They were people who had worked for a time teaching the peasants how to farm. But the way they plant isn't the way we do it. Indians reject the chemical fertilizers they tried to teach us about. They weren't really welcomed so they left, but they were very good friends of my father and helped us. They knew the problems of our village. They went back to their country but they still love Guatemala and help my father. [...]

When my father was arrested the second time, they considered him a political prisoner. The case against him was much worse this time. Now that he was a political prisoner, he was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was a communist, a subversive, they said. The same military commissioners as the first time came and got him from our house with clubs and took him to prison. They beat him and tied him up. He was a political prisoner. This was much worse for him. But by now the community was more aware of all these things. They had their own means of self-defence against the landowners. My brothers now spoke a bit of Spanish and my mother had also learned something from all the suffering, all the knocks, all the responsibility she'd had. We also had the support of the priests, the nuns, the unions and our community. It wasn't just my father now, it was a whole people behind him. My father was well known and well loved in many places so there was a big protest against my father's arrest. The unions especially pressed for his release. They still wanted witnesses, lawyers and all those things of course, but my father was soon out of prison. They started threatening him again even before he was out. They said if he continued his work, he would be assassinated and this time if they couldn't kill him they'd kill one of his children. This was his death sentence from the authorities. Of course, the authorities didn't exactly say that *they* would kill him, but they said the landowners would take care of it.

He was in prison for fifteen days. Then he came home. He was very proud and very happy because in prison he'd met another prisoner who really *was* a political prisoner. He was someone who defended the peasants and he told my father the peasants should unite and form a peasants' league to reclaim their lands. He said it wasn't our problem alone: our enemies weren't the landowners but the whole system. This man saw things more clearly than my father. So my father came back very proudly and said, 'We must fight the rich because they have become rich with our land, our crops.' That was when my father started to join up with other peasants and discussed the creation of the CUC with them. A lot of peasants had been discussing the committee but nothing concrete had been done, so my father joined the CUC and helped them understand things more clearly. My father didn't have to be told how to organize. Many peasants had been thinking of how they would form the CUC, so, in fact, the peasants had already shown they were unhappy with their situation.

My father was in clandestinity from 1977 onwards; that is, he was in hiding. He left our house so he wouldn't involve us. He left his family and went to work with the peasants in other regions. He came back now and again but had to come via the mountains because if he passed through the town the landowners would know he was at home. It was very sad for us that he couldn't live with us at home. He came at night and left at night. Or he spent several days at home but didn't go out. Our community suffered a great deal because they loved him as if he were their own father. Everything in our life is like a film. Constant suffering. We began thinking, with the help of other friends, other *compañeros*, that our enemies were not only the landowners who lived near us, and above all not just the landowners who forced us to work and paid us little. It was not only now we were being killed; they had been killing us since we were children, through malnutrition, hunger, poverty. We started thinking about the roots of the problem and came to the conclusion that everything stemmed from the ownership of land. The best land was not in our hands. It belonged to the big landowners. Every time they see that we have new land, they try to throw us off it or steal it from us in other ways.

XVI
PERIOD OF REFLECTION ON THE ROAD TO FOLLOW

'An obscure vision, obscure because he dared not free it from his consciousness and examine it; he was content to half look at it, and seek no explanation.'

—Miguel Angel Asturias, *Men of Maize*

I'd like to say here, that I wasn't the only important one. I was part of a family, just like all my brothers and sisters. The whole community was important. We used to discuss many of the community's problems together, especially when someone was ill and we couldn't buy medicine, because we were getting poorer and poorer. We'd start discussing and heaping insults on the rich who'd made us suffer for so long. It was about then I began learning about politics. I tried to talk to people who could help me sort my ideas out. I wanted to know what the world was like on the other side. I knew the *finca*, I knew the *Altiplano*. But what I didn't know was about the problems of the other Indians in Guatemala. I didn't know the problems other groups had holding onto their land. I knew there were lots of other Indians in other parts of the country, because I'd been meeting them in the *finca* since I was a child, but although we all worked together, we didn't know the names of the towns they came from, or how they lived, or what they ate. We just imagined that they were like us. Well, I started thinking about my childhood, and I came to the conclusion that I hadn't had a childhood at all. I was never a child. I hadn't been to school, I hadn't had enough food to grow properly, I had nothing. I asked myself: 'How is this possible?' I compared it to the life of the children of rich people I'd seen. How they ate. Even their dogs. They even taught their dogs only to recognize their masters and reject the maids. All these things were jumbled up in my mind, I couldn't separate my ideas. [...]

The CUC started growing; it spread like fire among the peasants in Guatemala. We began to understand that the root of all our problems was exploitation. That there were rich and poor and that the rich exploited the poor—our sweat, our labour. That's how they got richer and richer. The fact that we were always waiting in offices, always bowing to the authorities, was part of the discrimination we Indians suffered. So was the cultural oppression which tries to divide us by taking away our traditions and prevents unity among our people. The situation got worse when the murderous generals came to power, although I didn't actually know who was the president at the time. [...]

Later I had the opportunity of meeting other Indians, Achi Indians, the group that lives the closest to us. And I got to know some Mam Indians too. They all told me: 'The rich are bad. But not all *ladinos* are bad.' And I started wondering: 'Could it be that not all *ladinos* are bad?' I used to think they were all bad. But *they* said that they lived with poor *ladinos*. There were poor *ladinos* as well as rich *ladinos*, and they were exploited as well. That's when I began recognizing exploitation. I kept on going down to the *finca* but now I really wanted to find out, to prove if that was true and learn all the details. There were poor *ladinos* in the *finca*. They worked the same, and their children's bellies were swollen like my little brother's. So I said: 'It must be true, then, that not all *ladinos* are bad.' I was just beginning to speak a little Spanish in those days and I began to talk to them. I said to one poor *ladino*: 'You're a poor *ladino*, aren't you?' And he nearly hit me. He said: 'What do you know about it, Indian?' I wondered: 'Why is it that when I say poor *ladinos* are like us, I'm spurned?' I didn't know then the same system which tries to isolate us Indians also puts up barriers between Indians and *ladinos*. I knew that all *ladinos* rejected us but I didn't know why. I was more confused. I still thought all *ladinos* were bad.

Soon afterwards, I was with the nuns and we went to a village in Uspantán where mostly *ladinos* live. The nun asked a little boy if they were poor and he said: 'Yes, we're poor but we're not Indians.' That stayed with me. The nun didn't notice, she went on talking. She was foreign, she wasn't Guatemalan. She asked someone else the same question and he said: 'Yes, we're poor but we're not Indians.' It was very painful for me to accept that an Indian was inferior to a *ladino*. I kept on worrying about it. It's a big barrier they've sown between us, between Indian and *ladino*. I didn't understand it. In our village, we went on working. I still didn't have a clear idea of who exactly our enemies were. We began putting safety measures into practice in our village. We used the methods our

forefathers had used, and which our own grandparents told us about. Our forefathers passed them down to us. We said that if the landowners' soldiers come, we'll kill them right here. That's when we decided to use violence. I remember that it was my job to explain to the children of the community that our situation had nothing to do with fate but was something which had been imposed on us. I taught them that they had to defend themselves against it, to defend our parents' rights. I'd have a sort of political chat with the children, although I wasn't very clear about our situation politically. But my experiences told me what I needed. I didn't need speeches or courses or anything like that. I didn't have to read books because my experiences were born of suffering. I, who'd hardly had a pair of shoes by the time I was fifteen. Shoes: they protected feet against the heat and the stones. But, all the same, I didn't really know what to do with them.

I didn't sleep much during this period, thinking about the future. What would it be like if all the Indians rose up and took the land and the crops away from the landowners? Would they get weapons and kill us? I had incredible dreams. But, in fact, they weren't just empty dreams. My dreams came true when we started organizing. Children had to behave like grown-ups. We women had to play our part as women in the community, together with our parents, our brothers, our neighbours. We all had to unite, all of us together. [...] We already had various organisations: children's groups, young people's groups, women's groups, catechists' groups, and we began strengthening these groups. We wanted to make plans for us all to learn Spanish. I spent one afternoon teaching the children the bit of Spanish I knew. Not to write, of course, because I couldn't write. I couldn't read or write. But to teach them to speak as we spoke in our language.

At the end of 1977, I decided to join a more formal group—a group of peasants in Huehuetenango. It was a clandestine group and we'd go down to the *finca* and work among the workers in the *finca*. The *compañeros* of the CUC worked among them too. And yet, I still hadn't reached the rewarding stage of participating fully, as an Indian first, and then as a woman, a peasant, a Christian, in the struggle of all my people. That's when I started being more involved.

My father went on with his work. He used to say: 'My children, there are rich people and there are poor. The rich have become rich because they took what our ancestors had away from them, and now they grow fat on the sweat of our labour. We know this is true because we live it every day, not because someone else tells us. The rich try to obstruct us. The rich come from over there, where the *ladinos*' government is. It's the government of the rich, the landowners.' We began seeing things more clearly and, as I said, it was not difficult for us to understand that we had to join together in the struggle, because for us this was something real, something we'd all experienced. [...]

XVII SELF-DEFENCE IN THE VILLAGE

‘...They began to fulfil the destiny which was concealed in the marrow of their bones...’

—Popol Vuh

My time working as a maid, my long stay in the *finca* without going home, and my parents’ problems, made me very confused. Yes, I was very confused. I went through a sort of painful change within myself. It wasn’t so difficult for the rest of them at home to understand what was real and what was false. But I found it very hard. What did exploitation mean to me? I began to see why conditions are so different. Why do they reject us? Why is the Indian not accepted? Why was it that the land used to belong to us? Used our ancestors to live here? Why don’t outsiders accept Indian ways? This is where discrimination lies! [...] The moment I learned to identify our enemies was very important for me. For me now the landowner was a big enemy, an evil one. The soldier too was a criminal enemy. And so were all the rich. We began using the term ‘enemies’, because we didn’t have the notion of enemy in our culture, until those people arrived to exploit us, oppress us and discriminate against us. In our community we are all equal. We all have to help one another and share the little we have between us. There is no superior and inferior. But we realized that in Guatemala there was something superior and something inferior and that *we* were the inferior. The *ladinos* behave like a superior race. Apparently there was a time when the *ladinos* used to think we weren’t people at all, but a sort of animal. All this became clear to me.

I threw myself into my work and I told myself we had to defeat the enemy. We began to organize. Our organization had no name. We began by each of us trying to remember the tricks our ancestors used. They say they used to set traps in their houses, in the path of the *conquistadores*, the Spaniards. Our ancestors were good fighters, they were real men. It’s not true what white people say, that our ancestors didn’t defend themselves. They used ambushes. [...] My grandfather said: ‘Yes, my children, you have to defend yourselves. Our ancestors defended themselves. The white men are telling lies when they say we are passive. They fought too. And we, why don’t we fight with the same arms the landowners use?’ If an elderly person tells us this, then it must be true.

The first step the community took was to have my father, the village leader, living in the centre of the community. Everyone felt my father should live in the centre. When Kjell Laugerud divided our small pieces of land into plots, some people had to go and live on one side of the village, some on the other, in different plots. So we were some way away from our neighbours. What my brothers and I decided (my father happened to be with us at the time too) was that we would share the piece of land we had on the flat ground, on the plain. All the members of the community who lived some way off could come down and we’d live together, or with our houses close together so that we could call to each other when the landowners’ people came. This was the first step we took. But what were we going to tell people? They knew we had to defend ourselves against the landowners, but they didn’t understand that one day the repression would reach us and large numbers of us would be killed. We held a meeting and discussed it with everybody. We talked about sharing out the piece of land behind our house so that our neighbours could live closer. We also asked other neighbours to share their land too. We said that in two months we could have all our neighbours’ houses near ours. This proposition was put to the community: ‘Are you willing to leave your houses and live near us so that when the landowners come, we’ll all be together?’

We were making these plans when a village near ours got a taste of the repression. The repression reached San Pablo, a village nearby. They kidnapped the community’s leaders—the elected representatives, the chief catechist, and their families. They took away some other catechists too. Men, women and children were taken. They too were fighting a landowner, but they weren’t organized yet. This served as an example for us, and my brothers and I, and our neighbours began dividing up the work to be done. Everyone went to cut palm leaves to build the new houses. Some prepared the ground for the houses, others collected leaves, and others cut poles for the walls. We shared the work out. We built the houses close together.

And one day a troop of soldiers arrived. It was the first time we'd seen so many troops in the village; there were ninety of them. We couldn't resist but we did nothing to provoke them either. The community knew more or less what to do if any one of us was taken. The idea from the beginning was that they either left us alone or they'd have to kill all of us. We wouldn't let a single *compañero* be taken away from the village. That's what we did. The soldiers stayed for two weeks and used the community house where we carried out all our ceremonies, and held our meetings. They lived there. At night they went into our maize fields to dig up our potatoes, cut off the maize cobs and young beans, and ate very well. They cut any cobs they wanted. For us this was violating our culture, because we Indians have to perform a ceremony before picking the cob, the fruit of the earth and of the peasants' labour. We were very angry but we didn't show our anger because there were ninety of them, capable of massacring us all. They were armed. [...]

After they left, the village got together to decide what to do with our maize fields. We would forget our customs, our ceremonies, for a while, and plan our security first.

[...] We began teaching our children to be discreet. They're usually discreet anyway, but we advised them not to say a single word to any children who weren't from our village about what their parents were doing. We prepared our signals. Our signals were to be all the everyday things we use, all natural things. I remember that we performed a ceremony before beginning our self-defence measures. It was a village ceremony where we asked the Lord of the natural world, our one God, to help us and give us permission to use his creations of nature to defend ourselves with. The ceremony was conducted with a lot of feeling, because, well, we knew that it was up to the community, up to our measures of self-defence, whether two, three, four or five of our members would be kidnapped, tortured or murdered. The following day everyone came with ideas of how to defend themselves. Some brought stones, others machetes, others sticks, others their work tools. The women brought salt, hot water, etc. We put all our ideas together. How would we use them? One *compañero* would say: 'I think that this is useful for defence. How can we use it?' Another would say: 'This is what I have in mind...'. And he explains what *he* would do if they came. Each person contributed something. Then we organized very carefully who would plan the best ways to use the community's ideas and who would teach them. How would we teach the children? Which duties would the children have? Who would be in charge of seeing that the women played their special part? When would we hold a general assembly to evaluate all this? We began to get a much better idea of how to organize our community.

I was enthralled by all this. As I said before, when the government parcelled the land out and tried to create divisions within the community—everyone with their own plot, their own bit of land—there wasn't enough land for us all to live in one place together. They gave us plots which were very separate, a long way from each other, and many neighbours lived quite a distance away, and the houses were very far apart. [...] So when the repression started coming closer, we realized we had to put our houses together to confront the soldiers when they came to repress our village. [...]

[...] That's when we started preparing things we had to do secretly, like the traps. [...] They were usually large ditches with invisible nets so that neither animals nor soldiers could see them. They might also be something metal to stop the army. In any case, we know the army can't come in lorries, or bicycles or cars because there are no roads as far as our village. They have to come on foot along the one path. We'd already seen that the army was cowardly and didn't dare come too far into the mountains. They're frightened because they think there are guerrillas there. Those poor soldiers, they don't even know what a guerrilla is, so they imagine he is a monster, like a fierce bird or a sort of animal. This makes them afraid of going into the mountains. [...]

That first night they arrived, they went into the houses and found no-one. They beat the dogs, killed some of them, and left. We said to ourselves: 'They went into our houses and they are going to go on looking for us. So now we have good cause to find new methods.' That's how the community itself looks for ways of improving certain things that weren't any good. We did everything together because there were no longer specific tasks for men and others for women. Now, going to the fields or building a neighbour's house, or anything, was all done communally. [...]

We thought of what would happen if at any time, we couldn't use our traps, or rather that they didn't work. If we couldn't use our escape route or any other of our security measures, we should at least have our weapons ready—the weapons of the people: machetes, stones, hot water, chile, salt. We found a use for all these things. We knew how to throw stones, we knew how to throw salt in someone's face—how to do it effectively. This could only work against the paramilitary forces, from the regiment, because we knew that we had no answer for machine guns. But if the police came with their guns, our weapons can be effective. We've often used lime. Lime is very fine and you have to aim it in a certain way for it to go into someone's eyes. We learned to do it through practice; we practised taking aim and watching where the enemy is. You can blind a policeman by throwing lime in his face. And with stones for instance, you have to throw it at the enemy's head, at his face. If you throw it at his back, it will be effective but not as much as at other parts of the body. These are things we're practising the whole time in our village. And if we're stuck in our homes, we can resort to throwing hot water at them. [...] We need to be on the constant lookout for new techniques. But everything must have a reason or we might do things we want to, but without knowing why we're doing them. Our main weapon, however, is the Bible. We began to study the Bible as a text through which to educate our village. There are many wonderful stories in the Bible.

XVIII
THE BIBLE AND SELF-DEFENCE: THE EXAMPLES OF JUDITH, MOSES AND DAVID

'...when the strangers who came from the East arrived, when they arrived; the ones who brought Christianity which ended the power in the East, and made the heavens cry and filled the maize bread of the Katún with sadness...'

—Chilam Balam

'Their chief was not defeated by young warriors, nor wounded by sons of Titans. It was Judith, the daughter of Marari, who disarmed him with the beauty of her face.'

—Book of Judith

[...] As I was saying, for us the Bible is our main weapon. It has shown us the way. Perhaps those who call themselves Christians, but who are really only Christians in theory, won't understand why we give the Bible the meaning we do. But that's because they haven't lived as we have. And also perhaps because they can't analyze it. I can assure you that any one of my community, even though he's illiterate and has to have it read to him and translated into his language, can learn many lessons from it, because he has no difficulty understanding what reality is and what the difference is between the paradise up above, in Heaven, and the reality of our people here on Earth. We do this because we feel it is the duty of Christians to create the kingdom of God on Earth among our brothers. This kingdom will exist only when we all have enough to eat, when our children, brothers, parents don't have to die from hunger and malnutrition. That will be the 'Glory', a kingdom for we who have never known it. I'm only talking about the Catholic Church in general terms because, in fact, many priests came to our region and were anti-communists, but nevertheless understood that the people weren't communists but hungry; not communists, but exploited by the system. And they joined our people's struggle too, they opted for the life we Indians live. [...] We believe the Bible is a necessary weapon for our people. Today I can say that it is a struggle which cannot be stopped. Neither the governments nor imperialism can stop it because it is a struggle of hunger and poverty. Neither the government nor imperialism can say: 'Don't be hungry,' when we are all dying of hunger.

To learn about self-defence, as I was saying, we studied the Bible. We began fashioning our own weapons. We knew very well that the government, those cowardly soldiers...perhaps I shouldn't talk of them so harshly, but I can't find another word for them. Our weapons were very simple. And at the same time, they weren't so simple when we all started using them, when the whole village was armed. As I said before, the soldiers arrived one night. Our people were not in their homes. They'd left the village and gone to the camp. They made sure that we hadn't abandoned the village altogether but thought it would be better to occupy it in the daytime. So sometime later, when we weren't expecting them, about fifteen days later, our lookouts saw the army approaching. [...] We said: 'What are we going to do with this army?' They came into the village and began beating our dogs and killing our animals. They went into the houses and looted them. They went crazy looking for us all over the place. Then we asked: 'Who is willing to risk their lives now?' I, my brothers and some other neighbours immediately put up our hands. We planned to give the army a shock and to show them we were organized and weren't just waiting passively for them. We had less than half an hour to plan how we were going to capture some weapons. We chose some people—the ones who'd go first, second, third, fourth—to surprise the enemy. How would we do it? We couldn't capture all ninety soldiers who'd come to the village, but we could get the rearguard. My village is a long way from the town, up in the mountains. You have to go over the mountains to get to another village. We have a little path to the village just wide enough for horses...and there are big rivers nearby so that the path isn't straight. It bends a lot. So we said, 'Let's wait for the army on one of those bends and when the soldiers pass, we'll ambush the last one.' We knew we were risking our lives but we knew that this example would benefit the village very much because the army would stop coming and searching the village all the time. And that's what we did.

We chose a *compañera*, a very young girl, the prettiest in the village. She was risking her life, and she was risking being raped as well. Nevertheless, she said: 'I know very well that if this is my part in the struggle, I have to do it. If

this is how I contribute to the community, I'll do it.' So this *compañera* goes ahead on another path to a place that the army has to pass on their way to the village. That's where we prepared the ambush. We didn't have firearms, we had only our people's weapons. We'd invented a sort of Molotov cocktail by putting petrol in a lemonade bottle with a few iron filings, mixed with oil, and a wick to light it. So if the army got one of us, or if we couldn't do anything else, we'd set fire to them. This cocktail could burn two or three soldiers because it could land on them and burn their clothes. We had catapults too, or rather, they were the ones we'd always used to protect the maize fields from the birds that would come into the fields and eat the cobs when they were growing. The catapults could shoot stones a long way and if your aim is good it lands where you want it to. We had machetes, stones, sticks, chile and salt—all the different people's weapons. We had none of the weapons the army had. The community decided that the young girl who went on ahead would try to flirt with the last soldier and try to make him stop and talk to her. We all had numbers: who would be the first to jump, who would get him off balance, who would frighten him and who would disarm him. Each of us had a special task in capturing the soldier. [...]

My job was to jump onto the path as well. Between us we got the soldier off balance. One of us said: 'Don't move, hands up.' And the soldier thought there was a gun pointing at his head or his back. Whatever he thought, he did nothing. Another *compañero* said: 'Drop your weapon.' And he dropped it. We took his belt off and checked his bag. We took his grenades away, his rifle, everything. I thought it was really funny, it's something I'll never forget, because we didn't know how to use it. We took his rifle, his big rifle, and a pistol, and we didn't even know how to use the pistol. [...]

We took the disarmed soldier to my house, taking all the necessary precautions. We blindfolded him so that he wouldn't recognize the house he was going to. [...] Then came a very beautiful part when all the mothers in the village begged the soldier to take a message back to the army, telling all the soldiers there to think of our ancestors. The soldier was an Indian from another ethnic group. The women asked him how he could possibly have become a soldier, an enemy of his own race, his own people, the Indian race. Our ancestors never set bad examples like that. They begged him to be the light within his camp. They explained to him that bearing a son and bringing him up was a big effort, and to see him turn into a criminal, as he was, was unbearable. All the mothers in the village came to see the soldier. Then the men came too and begged him to recount his experience when he got back to the army and to take on the role, as a soldier, of convincing the others not to be so evil, not to rape the women of our race's finest sons, the finest examples of our ancestors. They suggested many things to him. We told the soldier that our people were organized, and were prepared to give their last drop of blood to counter everything the army did to us. We made him see that it wasn't the soldiers who were guilty but the rich who don't risk their lives. They live in nice houses and sign papers. It's the soldier who goes around the villages, up and down the mountains, mistreating and murdering his own people.

The soldier went away very impressed, he took this important message with him. When we first caught him, we'd had a lot of ideas, because we wanted to use the gun but didn't know how. It wasn't that we wanted to kill the soldier because we knew very well that one life is worth as much as many lives. But we also knew that the soldier would tell what he'd seen, what he'd felt and what we'd done to him, and that for us it could mean a massacre—the deaths of children, women, and old people in the village. The whole community would die. So we said: 'What we'll do with this man is execute him, kill him. Not here in the village but outside.' But people kept coming up with other ideas of what to do, knowing full well the risk we were running. In the end, we decided that, even though it might cost us our lives, this soldier should go and do what we'd asked him, and really carry through the role he had to play. [...] We didn't kill the soldier. The army itself took care of that when he got back to camp. They said he must be an informer, otherwise how could he possibly have stayed and then returned. They said the law says that a soldier who abandons his rifle must be shot. So they killed him.

This was the village's first action and we were happy. We now had two guns, we had a grenade, and we had a cartridge belt, but we didn't know how to use them, nobody knew. We all wanted to find someone who could show us but we didn't know where or who, because whoever we went to, we'd be accused of being guerrillas using weapons. [...]

XXVII
KIDNAPPING AND DEATH OF RIGOBERTA'S MOTHER

'We must prevail over the times we are living in with the help of our ancestors.'

—Rigoberta Menchú

'He bragged that he would burn up my borders, and kill my young men with his sword, and dash the suckling children against the ground, and make mine infants as a prey, and my virgins as a spoil. But the Almighty Lord hath disappointed them by the hand of a woman.'

—Book of Judith 16:5–6

And so my mother went back to our village, and was going secretly to buy things for the community when they kidnapped her on the 19th of April, 1980.

I knew that after they'd killed my father, my mother was on her way back to my village. It made me very sad for her because she told me that she had a lot to do with other ethnic groups, in other regions, getting people organized. If my mother went back to the *Altiplano* it was certainly because eight *compañeros* from my village were killed in the Spanish embassy. These eight *compañeros* were our village's best, most active *compañeros*. Well, my mother said: 'I'll go back to my home because my community needs me now.' And she went back. The priests and nuns who were in my village at the time offered to help her leave the country, but my mother had never thought of being a refugee. She said: 'No, I can't, my people need me and here is where I have to be.' She went home and, in fact, it was true that the community was dying of hunger, because they couldn't go down to any town or anywhere. Nobody dared risk their lives just to go and buy something to eat.

I sometimes used to hear that my mother was in other provinces because, just by chance, people would tell me about this woman who'd had such and such an experience. And I'd say: 'That's my mother. Thank goodness she's not in the *Altiplano*.' But I was extremely uneasy because I didn't know where she was and what could be happening to her. We know very well, we're quite clear about it, that if the time comes for our parents to die, they die knowing it's for our cause. And I always hoped to see them again. If only we could all be together again one day. My mother used to say that through her life, through her living testimony, she tried to tell women that they too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it's not only the men who suffer. Women must join the struggle in their own way. My mother's words told them that any evolution, any change, in which women had not participated, would not be a change, and there would be no victory. She was as clear about this as if she were a woman with all sorts of theories and a lot of practice. My mother spoke almost no Spanish, but she spoke two languages—Quiché, and a bit of Kekchi. She took all that courage and all that knowledge she had, and went to organize her people. But it was, oh, so painful for me, when I'd hear that my mother was in Sololá, and then I'd hear from someone else that she was in Chimaltenango, or that she was going around El Quiché.

My mother travelled through many provinces organizing. She actually went to the women and said that when a woman sees her son tortured and burned to death, she is incapable of forgiving anyone or ridding herself of that hatred, that bitterness. 'I can't forgive my enemies,' she said. She took this important message and was very influential in many places. Many people respected her. She even went into the shanty towns round the cities. My mother was very active. She worked alongside other women and she talked to them. That is, you didn't have to go to a meeting to talk to my mother because she'd go to houses and recount her experiences while they all made *tortillas*. That was how she worked. She talked about her experiences while she helped them with their work.

I remember when my little brother disappeared, our whole community united and joined together in a protest, after my mother had gone to enquire after him at the police, and the army, and had received no reply. So, they all went,

all of them. The community acted together for the first time; the majority of them were women. We knew that if the men went, they'd be kidnapped and tortured. So my mother said it would be better to hold a demonstration of women and children to see if the enemies, the army, were so shameless, so cowardly, that they would massacre women and children. We knew they were capable of it. That is, we all came knowing full well that there could be a massacre in the town. They reached the town, occupied the administrative offices, and took the mayor prisoner. If he saw justice was done, they would respect him, but if he turned his back on justice, he would be executed. It was the first time women had acted this way. Everyone admired them. First, because they'd come a long way, and second, because they came with their children to protest to the authorities against the kidnapping, and demonstrate their revulsion.

Some days later, they occupied the Guatemalan Congress. My mother was there, and my father, and the peasants. It was on the Guatemalan National Day. All the deputies were there. Indians from all over El Quiché joined those from Uspantán in the march and, with the help of the unions and of the CUC, took over the Congress building. When the deputies realised what had happened, it was too late to get us out. We were helped by the unions, other peasants and students as well. So what would they do? Were they going to massacre us? That was the first danger we faced. Something rather amusing happened. When they entered the Congress, the soldiers immediately raised their rifles. The person at the head of the demonstration was one of my brothers. When my eldest brother began to speak, they raised their rifles and took aim. Then my little sister came with a white flower. This is very meaningful for us. I think I said before, we only cut flowers when we really need to or when it's for something important. Well, all the people on the demonstration held bunches of flowers to mean that they appealed for respect for human life and also for a solution to their plight. My little sister put herself in front of the rifle with her flower, and they didn't dare shoot my brother. We occupied the Congress to plead for my little brother who'd been kidnapped, and for the hundreds of catechists who'd been taken away in different villages. We also demanded the withdrawal of the army from our communities and that they cease massacring us and raping our women. It was a protest to ask the president to stop the repression, and we did it peacefully. But nothing.

Their immediate reply was to burn my brother. And they went on massacring more villages, like before. Well, because of this, we had to act more quickly. What they told us was that Congress wasn't a building for Indians, and that Indians had no right to enter Congress. It was a respectable building, because it was for members of the government. But the peasants said, we're here and it's here you can kill us... That is, they'd gone ready to die, knowing that if there was a massacre, it would not be in vain but would be a protest against our situation. And after that, we went on organising continually, we did it joyfully because ours was a just cause and we were motivated by something, something real.

My mother was kidnapped. And from the very beginning she was raped by the town's high-ranking army officers. And I want to say in advance that I have in my hands details of every step of the rape and torture suffered by my mother. I don't want to reveal too many things because it will implicate some *compañeros* who are still doing their work very well. My mother was raped by her kidnappers, and after that they took her down to the camp—a camp called Chajup which means 'under the cliff'. They have a lot of pits there where they punish the people they have kidnapped and where my little brother was tortured as well. They took my mother to the same place. There she was raped by the officers commanding the troops. After that she was subjected to terrible tortures. The first day they shaved her head, put a uniform on her and then they said: 'If you're a guerrilla why don't you fight us here.' But my mother said nothing. While they beat her, they asked her where we were, and said that if she made a confession, they'd let her go. But my mother knew very well that they did that so that they could torture her other children and would never let her go. She pretended she knew nothing. She defended every one of us until the end. On the third day of her torture, they cut off her ears. They cut her whole body bit by bit. They began with small tortures, small beatings and worked up to terrible tortures. The first tortures she'd received became infected. It was her turn to suffer the terrible pain her son had suffered too. They tortured her the whole time and didn't give her any food for many days. From the pain, from the torture all over her body, disfigured and starving, my mother began to lose consciousness and was in her death throes. Then the officer in charge sent for the medical team they have in the army and they gave her injections and enough serum to revive her, to bring her back to life again. They gave her

medicine, they looked after her well, and found a place for her where she was treated well. When she was a little better, well, of course, she asked for food. They gave her food. Then they started raping her again. She was disfigured by those same officers. She endured a great deal, but she didn't die.

When my mother was on the point of dying again, they sent us messages by all sorts of methods. They took my mother's clothes to the town hall in Uspantán. They exhibited it to prove to us that she was in their hands. We sent certain people to investigate what was happening to her and they said that we should go, that my mother was still alive, that she was in their hands and they were torturing her. She needed to see one of her children. It was like that, the whole time. We'd lost my little brother, but I didn't know if my little sister had been captured with my mother or if she was doing other things. No-one knew. It was very painful for me to accept that my mother was being tortured and not to know anything about the rest of the family. None of us presented ourselves. Least of all my brothers. I was able to contact one of my brothers and he told me not to put my life in danger, that they were going to kill my mother anyway and would kill us too. We have to keep this grief as a testimony to them because they never exposed their lives even when their grief was great too. And so we had to accept that my mother was going to die anyway.

When they saw that none of her children were coming down to collect my mother's clothes, the army took her to a place near the town where it was very hilly. It was my hope that my mother would die surrounded by the nature she so loved. They put her under a tree and left her there, alive but dying. They didn't let my mother turn over, and her face was so disfigured, cut and infected; she could barely make any movement by herself. They left her there dying for four or five days, enduring the sun, the rain and the night. My mother was covered in worms, because in the mountains there is a fly which gets straight into any wound, and if the wound isn't tended in two days, there are worms where the fly has been. Since all my mother's wounds were open, there were worms in all of them. She was still alive. My mother died in terrible agony. When my mother died, the soldiers stood over her and urinated in her mouth; even after she was dead! Then they left a permanent sentry there to guard her body so that no-one could take it away, not even what was left of it. The soldiers were there right by her body, and they could smell my mother when she started to smell very strongly. They were there right by her; they ate near her, and, if the animals will excuse me, I believe not even animals act like that, like those savages in the army. After that, my mother was eaten by animals; by dogs, by all the *zopilotes* there are round there, and other animals helped too. They stayed for four months, until they saw that not a bit of my mother was left, not even her bones, and then they went away.

Of course, it was dreadful for us when we knew my mother was dying in agony. But, afterwards, when she was dead...naturally we weren't pleased because no human being is happy about that...but all the same, we were relieved to know my mother wasn't suffering any longer. She'd gone through so much torment that the one thing we wanted most was for them to kill her quickly, that she should live no longer.

INTRODUCTION

This book tells the life story of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian woman and a member of one of the largest of the twenty-two ethnic groups in Guatemala. She was born in the hamlet of Chimel, near San Miguel de Uspantán, which is the capital of the north-western province of El Quiché.

Rigoberta Menchú is twenty-three years old. She tells her story in Spanish, a language which she has spoken for only three years. Her life story is an account of contemporary history rather than of Guatemala itself. It is in that sense that it is exemplary: she speaks for all the Indians of the American continent. What she tells us of her relationship with nature, life, death and her community has already been said by the Indians of North America, those of Central America and those of South America. The cultural discrimination she has suffered is something that all the continent's Indians have been suffering ever since the Spanish conquest. The voice of Rigoberta Menchú allows the defeated to speak. She is a privileged witness: she has survived the genocide that destroyed her family and community and is stubbornly determined to break the silence and to confront the systematic extermination of her people. She refuses to let us forget.

Words are her only weapons. That is why she resolved to learn Spanish and break out of the linguistic isolation into which the Indians retreated in order to preserve their culture.

Rigoberta learned the language of her oppressors in order to use it against them. For her, appropriating the Spanish language is an act which can change the course of history because it is the result of a decision: Spanish was a language which was forced upon her, but it has become a weapon in her struggle. She decided to speak in order to tell of the oppression her people have been suffering for almost five hundred years, so that the sacrifices made by her community and her family will not have been made in vain.

She will not let us forget and insists on showing us what we have always refused to see. We Latin Americans are only too ready to denounce the unequal relations that exist between ourselves and North America, but we tend to forget that we too are oppressors and that we too are involved in relations that can only be described as *colonial*. Without any fear of exaggeration, it could be said that, especially in countries with a large Indian population, there is an internal colonialism which works to the detriment of the indigenous population. The ease with which North America dominates so-called 'Latin' America is to a large extent a result of the collusion afforded it by this internal colonialism. So long as these relations persist, the countries of Latin America will not be countries in any real sense of the word, and they will therefore remain vulnerable. That is why we have to listen to Rigoberta Menchú's appeal and allow ourselves to be guided by a voice whose inner cadences are so pregnant with meaning that we actually seem to hear her speaking and can almost hear her breathing. Her voice is so heart-rendingly beautiful because it speaks to us of every facet of the life of a people and their oppressed culture. But Rigoberta Menchú's story does not consist solely of heart-rending moments. Quietly, but proudly, she leads us into her own cultural world, a world in which the sacred and the profane constantly mingle, in which worship and domestic life are one and the same, in which every gesture has a pre-established purpose and in which everything has a meaning. Within that culture, everything is determined in advance; everything that occurs in the present can be explained in terms of the past and has to be ritualized so as to be integrated into everyday life, which is itself a ritual. As we listen to her voice, we have to look deep into our own souls for it awakens sensations and feelings which we, caught up as we are in an inhuman and artificial world, thought were lost for ever. Her story is overwhelming because what she has to say is simple and true. As she speaks, we enter a strikingly different world which is poetic and often tragic, a world which has forged the thought of a great popular leader. In telling the story of her life, Rigoberta Menchú is also issuing a manifesto on behalf of an ethnic group. She proclaims her allegiance to that group, but she also asserts her determination to subordinate her life to one thing. As a popular leader, her one ambition is to devote her life to overthrowing the relations of domination and exclusion which characterize internal colonialism. She and her people are taken into account only when their labour power is needed; culturally, they are discriminated against and rejected.

Rigoberta Menchú's struggle is a struggle to modify and break the bonds that link her and her people to the *ladinos*, and that inevitably implies changing the world. She is in no sense advocating a racial struggle, much less refusing to accept the irreversible fact of the existence of the *ladinos*. She is fighting for the recognition of her culture, for acceptance of the fact that it is different and for her people's rightful share of power.

In Guatemala and certain other countries of Latin America, the Indians are in the majority. The situation there is, *mutatis mutandis*, comparable to that in South Africa, where a white minority has absolute power over the black majority. In other Latin American countries, where the Indians are in a minority, they do not even have the most elementary rights which every human being should enjoy. Indeed, the so-called forest Indians are being systematically exterminated in the name of progress. But unlike the Indian rebels of the past, who wanted to go back to pre-Columbian times, Rigoberta Menchú is not fighting in the name of an idealized or mythical past. On the contrary, she obviously wants to play an active part in history and it is that which makes her thought so modern. She and her comrades have given their historical ambitions an organic expression in the shape of the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) and their decision to join the '31 January Popular Front', which was founded to commemorate the massacre on that date of a group of Quiché Indians who occupied the Spanish embassy Ciudad-Guatemala in order to draw attention to their plight. The group which occupied the embassy was led by Rigoberta's father, Vicente Menchú, who has since become a national hero for the Indians of Guatemala. The Popular Front, which consists of six mass organizations and was founded in January 1981, took the name '31 January' in memory of the massacre.

Early in January 1982, Rigoberta Menchú was invited to Europe by a number of solidarity groups as a representative of the 31 January Popular Front. It was then that I met her in Paris. The idea of turning her life story into a book came from a Canadian woman friend who is very sympathetic to the cause of the Guatemalan Indians. Never having met Rigoberta, I was at first somewhat reluctant, as I realized that such projects depend to a large extent on the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Such work has far-reaching psychological implications, and the revival of the past can resuscitate affects and zones of the memory which had apparently been forgotten forever and can lead to anxiety and stress situations.

As soon as we met, however, I knew that we were going to get along together. The admiration her courage and dignity aroused in me did much to ease our relationship.

She came to my home one evening in January 1982. She was wearing traditional costume, including a multicoloured *huipil* with rich and varied embroidery; the patterns were not symmetrical and one could have been forgiven for assuming that they were random. She was also wearing an ankle-length skirt; this too was multicoloured and the thick material was obviously hand-woven. I later learned that it was called *acorte*. She had a broad, brightly coloured sash around her waist. On her head, she wore a fuchsia and red scarf knotted behind her neck. When she left Paris, she gave it to me, telling me that it had taken her three months to weave the cloth. Around her neck she had an enormous necklace of red beads and old silver coins with a heavy solid silver cross dangling from it. I remember it as being a particularly cold night; in fact I think it was snowing. Rigoberta was wearing no stockings and no coat. Beneath her *huipil*, her arms were bare. Her only protection against the cold was a short cape made from imitation traditional fabric; it barely came to her waist. The first thing that struck me about her was her open, almost childlike smile. Her face was round and moon-shaped. Her expression was as guileless as that of a child and a smile hovered permanently on her lips. She looked astonishingly young. I later discovered that her youthful air soon faded when she had to talk about the dramatic events that had overtaken her family. When she talked about that, you could see the suffering in her eyes; they lost their youthful sparkle and became the eyes of a mature woman who has known what it means to suffer. What at first looked like shyness was in fact a politeness based upon reserve and gentleness. Her gestures were graceful and delicate. According to Rigoberta, Indian children learn that delicacy from a very early age; they begin to pick coffee when they are still very young and the berries have to be plucked with great care if the branches are not to be damaged.

I very soon became aware of her desire to talk and of her ability to express herself verbally.

Rigoberta spent a week in Paris. In order to make things easier and to make the best possible use of her time, she came to stay with me. Every day for a week, we began to record her story at nine in the morning, broke for lunch at about one, and then continued until six in the evening. We often worked after dinner too, either making more recordings or preparing questions for the next day. At the end of the week I had twenty-four hours of conversation on tape. For the whole of that week, I lived in Rigoberta's world. We practically cut ourselves off from the outside world. We established an excellent rapport immediately and, as the days passed and as she confided in me and told me the story of her life, her family and her community, our relationship gradually became more intense. As time went by, she became more self-assured and even began to seem contented. One day she told me that until then she had never been able to sleep all night without waking up in a panic because she had dreamed that the army was coming to arrest her.

But I think it was mainly the fact of living together under the same roof for a week that won me her trust; it certainly brought us closer together. I have to admit that this was partly an accident. A woman friend had brought me some maize flour and black beans back from Venezuela. Maize and beans are the staple diet in both Venezuela and Guatemala. I cannot describe how happy that made Rigoberta. It made me happy too, as the smell of *tortillas* and refried beans brought back my childhood in Venezuela, where the women get up early to cook *arepas** for breakfast. *Arepas* are much thicker than Guatemalan *tortillas*, but the ingredients are the same, as are the methods of cooking and preparing them. The first thing Rigoberta did when she got up in the morning was make dough and cook *tortillas* for breakfast; it was a reflex that was thousands of years old. She did the same at noon and in the evening. It was a pleasure to watch her. Within seconds, perfectly round, paper-thin *tortillas* would materialize in her hands, as though by miracle. The women I had watched in my childhood made *arepas* by patting the dough flat between the palms of their hands, but Rigoberta made her *tortillas* by patting it between her fingers, holding them straight and together and constantly passing the dough from one hand to the other. It is much more difficult to make perfectly shaped *tortillas* like that. The pot of black beans lasted us for several days and made up the rest of our daily menu. By chance, I had pickled some hot peppers in oil shortly before Rigoberta's arrival. She sprinkled her beans with the oil, which almost set one's mouth on fire. 'We only trust people who eat what we eat', she told me one day as she tried to explain the relationship between the guerrillas and the Indian communities. I suddenly realized that she had begun to trust me. A relationship based upon food proves that there are areas where Indians and non-Indians can meet and share things: the *tortillas* and black beans brought us together because they gave us the same pleasure and awakened the same drives in both of us. In terms of *ladino*-Indian relations, it would be foolish to deny that the *ladinos* have borrowed certain cultural traits from the Indians. As Linto points out, some features of the culture of the defeated always tend to be incorporated into the culture of the conqueror, usually via the economic-based slavery and concubinage that result from the exploitation of the defeated.

The *ladinos* have adopted many features of the indigenous culture and those features have become what George Devereux calls the 'ethnic unconscious'. The *ladinos* of Latin America make a point of exaggerating such features in order to set themselves apart from their original European culture: it is the only way they can proclaim their ethnic individuality. They too feel the need to be different and therefore have to differentiate themselves from the Europe that gave them their world-vision, their language and their religion. They inevitably use the native cultures of Latin America to proclaim their otherness and have always tended to adopt the great monuments of the Aztec, Mayan and Incan pre-Columbian civilizations as their own, without ever establishing any connection between the splendours of the past and the poor exploited Indians they despise and treat as slaves. Then there are the 'indigenists' who want to recover the lost world of their ancestors and cut themselves off completely from European culture. In order to do so, however, they use notions and techniques borrowed from that very culture. Thus, they promote the notion of an Indian nation.

Indigenism is, then, itself a product of what Devereux calls 'disassociative acculturation': an attempt to revive the past by using techniques borrowed from the very culture one wishes to reject and free oneself from.* The indigenist meetings held in Paris—with Indian participation—are a perfect example of what he means. Just like the avant-garde groups which still take up arms in various Latin American countries—and these groups should not be confused with resistance groups fighting military dictatorships, like the Guatemalan guerrillas, the associations of the families of

the 'disappeared ones', the countless trade union and other oppositional groups which are springing up in Chile and other countries, or the 'Plaza de Mayo Mothers' movement in Argentina—the indigenist groups also want to publicize their struggles in Paris. Paris is their sound box. Whatever happens in Paris has repercussions through the world, even in Latin America. Just as the groups which are or were engaged in armed struggle in America have supporters who adopt their political line, the Indians too have their European supporters, many of whom are anthropologists. I do not want to start a polemic and I do not want to devalue any one form of action; I am simply stating the facts.

The mechanism of acculturation is basic to any culture; all cultures live in a state of permanent acculturation. But there is a world of difference between acculturation and an attempt to impose one culture in order to destroy another. I would say that Rigoberta Menchú is a successful product of acculturation in that her resistance to *ladina* culture provides the basis for an antagonistic form of acculturation. By resisting *ladina* culture, she is simply asserting her desire for ethnic individuality and cultural autonomy.

Resistance can, for instance, take the form of rejecting the advantages that could result from adopting techniques from another culture. Rigoberta's refusal to use a mill to grind her maize is one example. Indian women have to get up very early to grind the pre-cooked maize with a stone if the *tortillas* are to be ready when they leave for work in the fields. Some people might argue that this is nothing more than conservatism, and that indeed is what it is: a way of preserving the practices connected with preparing *tortillas* and therefore a way to prevent a whole social structure from collapsing. The practices surrounding the cultivation, harvesting and cooking of maize are the very basis of the social structure of the community. But when Rigoberta adopts political forms of action (the CUC, the 31 January Popular Front and the Vicente Menchú Organization of Christian Revolutionaries) she is adopting techniques from another culture in order to strengthen her own techniques, and in order to resist and protect her own culture more effectively. Devereux describes such practices as adopting new means in order to support existing means. Rigoberta borrows such things as the Bible, trade union organization and the Spanish language in order to use them against their original owners. For her the Bible is a sort of ersatz which she uses precisely because there is nothing like it in her culture. She says that 'The Bible is written, and that gives us one more weapon.' Her people need to base their actions on a prophecy, on a law that comes down to them from the past.

When I pointed out the contradiction between her defence of her own culture and her use of the Bible, which was after all one of the weapons of colonialism, she replied without any hesitation whatsoever: 'The Bible says that there is one God and we too have one God: the sun, the heart of the sky.' But the Bible also teaches us that violence can be justified, as in the story of Judith, who cut off the head of a king to save her people. That confirms the need for a prophecy to justify action. Similarly, Moses led his people out of Egypt and his example justifies the decision to transgress the law and leave the community. The example of David shows that children too can take part in the struggle. Men, women and children can all justify their actions by identifying with biblical characters. The native peoples of Latin America have gone beyond the stage of introspection. It is true that their advances have sometimes been blocked, that their rebellions have been drowned in blood and that they have sometimes lost the will to go on. But they are now finding new weapons and new ways to adapt to their socio-economic situation.

Rigoberta has chosen words as her weapon and I have tried to give her words the permanency of print.

I must first warn the reader that, although I did train as an ethnographer, I have never studied Maya-Quiché culture and have never done fieldwork in Guatemala. Initially, I thought that knowing nothing about Rigoberta's culture would be a handicap, but it soon proved to be a positive advantage. I was able to adopt the position of someone who is learning. Rigoberta soon realized this: that is why her descriptions of ceremonies and rituals are so detailed. Similarly, if we had been in her home in El Quiché, her descriptions of the landscape would not have been so realistic.

When we began to use the tape recorder, I initially gave her a schematic outline, a chronology: childhood, adolescence, family, involvement in the struggle...As we continued, Rigoberta made more and more digressions, introduced descriptions of cultural practices into her story and generally upset my chronology. I therefore let her

talk freely and tried to ask as few questions as possible. If anything remained unclear, I made a note of it and we would spend the last part of the working day going over anything I was uncertain about. Rigoberta took an obvious pleasure in explaining things, helping me understand and introducing me to her world. As she told me her life story, she travelled back in time, reliving dreadful moments like the day the army burned her twelve-year-old brother alive in front of the family, and the weeks of martyrdom her mother underwent at the hands of the army before they finally let her die. As I listened to her detailed account of the customs and rituals of her culture, I made a list which included customs relating to death. Rigoberta read my list. I had decided to leave the theme of death until last, but when we met for the last time, something stopped me from asking her about the rituals associated with death. I had the feeling that if I asked about them my questions would become a prophecy, so deeply marked by death was her life. The day after she left, a mutual friend brought me a cassette on which Rigoberta had recorded a description of funeral ceremonies, 'because we forgot to record this.' That gesture was the final proof that Rigoberta is a truly exceptional woman; culturally, it also proved that she is a woman of complete integrity and was letting me know that she had not been taken in. In her culture, death is an integral part of life and is accepted as such.

In order to transform the spoken word into a book, I worked as follows.

I began by transcribing all the tapes. By that I mean that nothing was left out, not a word, even if it was used incorrectly or was later changed. I altered neither the style nor the sentence structure. The Spanish original covers almost five hundred pages of typescript.

I then read through the transcript carefully. During a second reading, I established a thematic card index, first identifying the major themes (father, mother, childhood, education) and then those which occurred most frequently (work, relations with *ladinos*, linguistic problems). This was to provide the basis of the division of the material into chapters. I soon reached the decision to give the manuscript the form of a monologue: that was how it came back to me as I re-read it. I therefore decided to delete all my questions. By doing so I became what I really was: Rigoberta's listener. I allowed her to speak and then became her instrument, her double, by allowing her to make the transition from the spoken to the written word. I have to admit that this decision made my task more difficult, as I had to insert linking passages if the manuscript was to read like a monologue, like one continuous narrative. I then divided it into chapters organized around the themes I had already identified. I followed my original chronological outline, even though our conversations had not done so, so as to make the text more accessible to the reader. The chapters describing ceremonies relating to birth, marriage and harvests did cause some problems, as I somehow had to integrate them into the narrative. I inserted them at a number of different points, but eventually went back to my original transcript and followed the order of Rigoberta's spontaneous associations. It was pointed out to me that placing the chapter dealing with birth ceremonies at the beginning of the book might bore the reader. I was also advised simply to cut it or include it in an appendix. I ignored all these suggestions. Perhaps I was wrong, in that the reader might find it somewhat off-putting. But I could not leave it out, simply out of respect for Rigoberta. She talked to me not only because she wanted to tell us about her sufferings but also—or perhaps mainly—because she wanted us to hear about a culture of which she is extremely proud and which she wants to have recognized. Once the manuscript was in its final form, I was able to cut a number of points that are repeated in more than one chapter. Some of the repetitions have been left as they stand as they lead in to other themes. That is simply Rigoberta's way of talking. I also decided to correct the gender mistakes which inevitably occur when someone has just learned to speak a foreign language. It would have been artificial to leave them uncorrected and it would have made Rigoberta look 'picturesque', which is the last thing I wanted.

It remains for me to thank Rigoberta for having granted me the privilege of meeting her and sharing her life with me. She allowed me to discover another self. Thanks to her, my American self is no longer something 'uncanny'. To conclude, I would like to dedicate these lines from Miguel Angel Asturias's 'Barefoot Meditations' to Rigoberta Menchú:

*Rise and demand; you are a burning flame.
You are sure to conquer there where the final horizon
Becomes a drop of blood, a drop of life,
Where you will carry the universe on your shoulders,
Where the universe will bear your hope.*

Elisabeth Burgos-Debray
Montreux-Paris
December 1982.