

Rigoberta Menchú meets the press

THE NOBEL LAUREATE, ACCUSED OF MISREPRESENTING HER LIFE, TRIES TO SIMULTANEOUSLY ARGUE THAT SHE DIDN'T LIE AND THAT IF SHE DID, IT DOESN'T MATTER.

BY JAMES PONIEWOZIK | In the 1983 book "I, Rigoberta Menchú," the eponymous author, a Mayan Quiché Indian and winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, speaks movingly of the bloody horror that befell her family over years of civil war in Guatemala. Moreover, Menchú states, "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."

A recent study suggests that the statement is more literal than it appears -- that in fact Menchú augmented her own story with that of the Indians of Guatemala generally, reporting experiences she either did not have or could not have witnessed and misrepresenting the violent history of her area of Guatemala to support her own cause as a Guatemalan guerrilla organizer.

Anthropologist David Stoll, who conducted some 120 interviews for his new book, "Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans," and Larry Rohter's subsequent New York Times investigation report that numerous Guatemalans say that the central land dispute in Menchú's story -- painted as an effort by wealthy landowners and the government to drive her father off his land -- was actually a long-running family feud; that Menchú, who claimed to be self-taught, in fact had a middle-school education; and that she described, movingly, witnessing the death by starvation of a brother who in fact died years before she was born.

In the ensuing controversy, conservative commentators like [David Horowitz](#) of Salon and Dinesh D'Souza dismissed Menchú as a fraud, while defenders, such as Greg Grandin and Francisco Goldman in [the Nation](#) charged that her story, if not always accurate, gets at the larger truth of the Mayans' repression by a brutal U.S.-backed government.

But Menchú herself had not directly responded to the charges since they broke late last year, except to cast doubt on the motives of her critics. (A statement from the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation contended that Menchú's accusers want to restore a "paternalistic vision" and that Stoll's interviews are "of dubious seriousness," but the foundation did not address the "supposed inexactitudes.") Thursday, in New York to discuss a forthcoming United Nations Truth Commission report on Guatemala with Kofi Annan, Menchú held a press conference to address the questions.

The diminutive Menchú, dressed in colorful blue and yellow Guatemalan clothing and accompanied by several people from her foundation, faced a well-behaved group of 20 to 25 journalists, few of whom seemed inclined to press the Nobel laureate very hard. Good-humored and defiant, Menchú, speaking through an interpreter, charged that her critics had attacked her to strike at an indigenous people for daring to add "to the official story our own story." But her answers to specific questions were incomplete, puzzling or contradictory.

Menchú began her remarks with what looked like a bombshell, dramatically offering an explanation for her recounting of the death of a younger brother named Nicolas. Menchú wrote that he died of malnutrition on a plantation when she was 8 and he was only 2 -- but Rohter found and interviewed her *older* brother, Nicolas, who refuted her story. Menchú's explanation: She had *two* brothers named Nicolas: one born in 1949, who died, and one born in 1950, whom Rohter talked to.

A stunning retort -- except that that birth date would make the other Nicolas 10 years older than Menchú. Did she watch her brother die of malnutrition when he was 17 years old? She did not directly answer a follow-up question asking how old Nicolas was when he died or what he died of. (Menchú and her representatives could not be reached for further comment by press time.) Reached at Middlebury College Thursday, Stoll said that a second Nicolas did exist, but died long before Menchú was born.

Likewise, Menchú reaffirmed that she was "self-taught," receiving only informal education from nuns while working as a maid at a convent school for a year. (She said she purposely omitted the nuns from her book to protect them from the government.) "She's still displaying a lack of candor," said Stoll, pointing to records showing that she had attended three Catholic schools and one public school. "There are four stages in Rigoberta's education, and what she's describing doesn't describe one of them."

Stoll, who is sympathetic to Menchú, considers "how one member or another of her family died" a relatively minor question -- no one disputes, for instance, that her parents and two brothers were killed by government forces. But her responses underscore doubts about how she represents larger questions affecting her portrayal of Guatemalan history, Indian life and the rise of the guerrilla movement.

There was some question before the press conference as to whether Menchú would directly rebut the charges at all. Some of her defenders have held that Western critics have unfairly, perhaps with bad intent, misunderstood Mayan oral tradition (Menchú's book was an interview transcribed by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray) - an argument that, in a statement by her publisher, Verso, seems to combine condescension with facile media criticism: "Those who have worked in similar oral cultures tell me [the first person is not identified; the essay is credited to the Verso editorial department] that the distinction between what has happened to oneself and what has happened to close relatives or friends can be easily lost. Likewise, in our culture, we think we have witnessed something when we have seen it on TV." (Hands up: Who remembers a family member pursuing a one-armed man in the name of justice?)

And at times, Menchú seemed to imply that her work should not be held to standards of literal truth. Her book, she emphasized, was not an "autobiography" but a "testimony": "It tells my personal testimony, but it also has parts of the testimony of the collectiveness of Guatemala," she said. "For common people such as myself, there is no difference between testimony, biography, and autobiography ... What we do is tell what we have lived, not just alone."

One could argue that even if its details are inaccurate, Menchú's book is still valuable as a document of Mayans' experience and of the horrors of the widely acknowledged abuses of the Guatemalan government. Even if that's true, however, it's troubling that Menchú seemed to want to have it both ways: She wanted both to offer factual rebuttals and to deny their importance. Take the central question of her father's land dispute. She claims her father was harassed by wealthy landowners. Stoll argues that it was principally a family feud. Menchú answered a query by quickly saying the family dispute was settled by 1960 (Stoll has cited records indicating the dispute carried on through the 1970s, for most of the period covered by her book) -- then segued into the general argument that the *real* land issue in Guatemala, between her people and the government, is still going on. Stoll, she said, has "decontextualized" this issue and "touched on this one little party that didn't have a lot of land." Fair enough -- but that "one little party" provides the very narrative thread for "I, Rigoberta Menchú."

Stoll believes that the firestorm over factual details has obscured more important historical issues, ones largely independent of the factual squabbles. For example, Menchú, claiming to speak for all poor Guatemalans, claims that the guerrilla resistance was a widely popular grass-roots movement among the Quiché Mayans. But Stoll argues that his interviews with Quichés indicate the choice "was imposed on them by a national-level contest

between the government and the guerrillas that came into their area ... Rigoberta does not have a monopoly on interpretation of the violence."

In the end, Menchú's response to Stoll and her other critics is to suggest that their charges should be dismissed as political, while discrepancies in her account should be forgiven *because* they're political -- but on the correct side. This isn't a line of argument that does her much good.

All of which raises the question of whether there is a serious political-historical discussion to be had between Stoll's and Menchú's camps -- one that will never really take place over the excited "liar, liar!" charges on one side and attacks on motives on the other. In her remarks Thursday, Menchú certainly gave every sign of ending the discussion: "This is the last time I will answer these questions ... I have a heart, I have blood. I will not allow people to play with my dead ones, to profane the dead."

With the U.N. Truth Commission preparing to deliver its report later this month and Guatemala assessing its postwar future, a less-polarized conversation might have been welcome. But between the accusations of PC fraud and defensive charges of grave-dancing, a potentially fruitful discussion of Central America's past and future may have been the first casualty of peace.

SALON | Feb. 12, 1999

James Poniewozik writes the [Under the Covers](#) column, which appears every Tuesday in Salon's Media Circus.

<http://archive.salon.com/news/1999/02/12newsa.html>