

Menchú, Rigoberta. 1984. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, edited and introduced by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray; translated by Ann Wright. London: Verso.

CHAPTER XXXIV: EXILE

And so the time came for me to leave there. I was happy, but, at the same time, something happened that I would never have believed possible. The *compañeros* got me out on a plane to Mexico, and I felt a shattered, broken woman, because I'd never imagined that one day those criminals would force me to abandon my country. All the same, I also hoped to come back very soon and carry on working. I didn't want to interrupt my work for a single moment, because I know that I can only hold my parents' banner high if I dedicate myself to the struggle that they left half finished.

I went to different parts of Mexico, but I didn't know what to do there. Poor people never dream of travelling abroad, we don't even dream of travelling anywhere. Because we can't. But, well...I left, I went to other places, got to know other people. I was with many people who love me very much and I've received the same affection from them as from my loved ones. I remember that they asked for my testimony about the situation in Guatemala and I was very moved. I was invited to take part in a conference of church people from Latin America, Central America and Europe, where I was asked to describe the lives of our women, and with such great pleasure. I talked about my mother at that meeting. I often had to suppress the great grief I felt when I spoke of her, but I did it with love, remembering also that my mother wasn't the only woman to have suffered and that many women are as courageous as she was.

Later I was told that some people were coming to visit me and that I'd be together with *compañeros* coming out of Guatemala. I was happy. It didn't matter which *compañeros* they were, men or women, because I loved all my people, and for me they're all brothers and sisters whoever they are. And soon afterwards I had the wonderful surprise of seeing my little sisters, and I felt so happy. And it doesn't really matter that we (not only myself but all my brothers and sisters) don't know the whereabouts of the grave of my brothers who died in the *finca*, nor the grave of my little brother who was tortured, nor that of my father, nor my mother. But after my parents' death, I hadn't heard anything about my brothers and sisters, yet I hoped and hoped that they were alive. When we were separated, my littlest sister was helping my mother. The other one had gone into the mountains with our *compañeros*, the guerrillas. The two of them had left the country together simply because my sister who was in the mountains felt that she had to go and help the other one, to accompany her and see that everything went smoothly. My little sister had opted for the armed struggle; she was eight when she joined the guerrillas. She thought like an adult, she felt like a woman, especially when it came to defending her people. Well, anyway, she went into the mountains. It was perhaps because she'd got to know the guerrillas before I did. I'd begun leaving our community and going off to others, so I'd begun to move away from the mountains to other more populated towns where they don't have the wonderful mountains we have. It wasn't because the guerrillas came to our village, but because when my sister went down to work in the Brol's *finca*, she found that most of the Brol's labourers were guerrillas. So my sister had contact with them, but she knew how to keep all her secrets. She never told my parents that she had

direct contact because she thought it could mean death for my parents. She'd be risking everything. She thought of my parents' lives and her own life, so she kept it all secret. When we realised that my sister had disappeared, we started investigating immediately and went looking for her. But people told us: 'Oh yes, she was in touch with the guerrilla army, so it's obvious she's gone off to the mountains.' But we weren't sure. We thought that perhaps she'd got lost, or been kidnapped, or anything, because they'd threatened that if they couldn't kill one of my parents, they'd kill one of us, I only knew for certain in 1979, when my sister came down from the mountains once and we met. She said: 'I'm happy. Don't worry about me. Even if I suffer hunger, pain and long marches through the mountains, I'm doing it with love and I'm doing it for you.' It was in a village where she'd been given permission to hear mass and go to communion. She'd come down to the village and by pure chance we were at the mass.

In Mexico I met people from Europe who had helped us. We'd met those same people when my parents were alive. They offered us help to go and live in Europe. They said it wasn't possible for a human being to bear so much. They told us, with the best of intentions, that we should go over there, that they'd give us a house and everything we needed. And my little sisters would have the opportunity to study. I couldn't decide for my sisters because I thought of them as women who could think for themselves and decide their own lives. So they talked to my sisters, but they rejected the proposition. They said: 'If you want to help us, send us help, but not for ourselves, for all the orphans who've been left.' These people couldn't understand why, despite all the risks we run, we still want to live in Guatemala. Of course, they couldn't understand, because only those of us who carry our cause in our hearts are willing to run the risks. After the army's furious urge to capture us had calmed down, our *compañeros* helped us to go back to Guatemala.

We went back to Guatemala and my sisters each chose an organisation to work in.

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So, because of my Christian background, I opted for the 'Vicente Menchú' Revolutionary Christians. I didn't choose it because it bore my father's name, but because, as a Christian, it was my duty to work with the people. My task was to educate the Christian *compañeros* whose faith brings them into the organisation. It's a bit like what I was talking about before, about being a catechist. Well, my work is just like being a catechist, except that I'm one who walks on the Earth, not one who thinks that the Kingdom of God only comes after death. Through all my experiences, through everything I'd seen, through so much pain and suffering, I learned what the role of a Christian in the struggle is, and what the role of a Christian on this Earth is. We all came to important conclusions by studying the Bible. All our *compañeros* did. We discovered that the Bible has been used as a way of making us accept our situation, and not to bring enlightenment to the poor. The work of revolutionary Christians is above all to condemn and denounce the injustices committed against the people. It is secret, but not a clandestine movement. We are the people and we can't hide completely. What we call 'clandestine' are the armed *compañeros* who live, not among the people, but up in the mountains. What we call 'secret' is all the work which we do secretly among the people.

We also denounce the stance of the Church hierarchy because it is so often hand in glove with the government. This is actually something I have thought about a lot. Well, because they call themselves Christians, yet they are often deaf to the suffering of the people. This is what I really meant before when I asked Christians to put into practice

what being a Christian really means. Many who call themselves Christians don't really deserve to be called Christians. They have no worries, and lovely houses. But that is all. That is why I say that the Church in Guatemala is divided in two. The Church of the poor (and many have taken this path) has the same beliefs as the poor. And the Church as a hierarchy, as an institution, is still a little clique. The majority of our people are Christian, but if our own shepherds (as they're called) teach us bad examples, and go hand in hand with the government, we are not going to follow them. This gave me a great deal to think about. For example, the nuns whom I lived with, made me sad. With their comfortable lives, they were wasteful women who did nothing for others.

Well, my role is now that of a leader. This is mostly because the enemy knows me. My job is above all carrying papers into the interior or to the towns, and organising the people, at the same time practising with them the light of the Gospel. My life does not belong to me. I've decided to offer it to a cause. They can kill me at any time, but let it be when I'm fulfilling a mission, so I'll know that my blood will not be shed in vain, but will serve as an example to my *compañeros*. The world I live in is so evil, so bloodthirsty, that it can take my life away from one moment to the next. So the only road open to me is our struggle, the just war. The Bible taught me that. I tried to explain this to a Marxist *compañero*, who told me she wanted to fight the revolution as a Christian. I told her that the whole truth is not found in the Bible, but neither is the whole truth in Marxism, and that she had to accept that. We have to defend ourselves against our enemy but, as Christians, we must-also defend our faith within the revolutionary process. At the same time, we have to think about the important work we have to do, after our victory, in the new society. I know that no-one can take my Christian faith away from me. Not the government, for fear, not weapons. And this is what I have to teach my people: that together we can build the people's Church, a true Church. Not just a hierarchy, or a building, but a real change inside people. I chose this as my contribution to the people's war. I am convinced that the people, the masses, are the only ones capable of transforming society. It's not just another theory. I chose to stay in the city among the people, instead of choosing to take up arms, as I said. We all contribute in different ways, but we are all working for the same objective.

That is my cause. As I've already said, it wasn't born out something good, it was born out of wretchedness and bitterness. It has been radicalized by the poverty in which my people live. It has been radicalized by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination which I've felt in the flesh. And by the oppression which prevents us performing our ceremonies, and shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are.

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Nevertheless, I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets.