Tainted testimony

by Paul Jeffrey in the April 21, 1999 issue

Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalens
By David Stoll. Westview, 336 pp.

When Rigoberta Menchú won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, many Guatemalans had never heard of her. Yet in the years leading up to the ceremony in Oslo, she had become well known abroad, mostly on the strength of her inspiring 1983 autobiographical testimony, I, *Rigoberta Menchú*. Based on a series of recorded conversations in Paris in 1982 with the leftist Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the book became a hit among solidarity activists and academics looking for a window into the life of an indigenous woman who had suffered at the hands of Latin America's homicidal military.

Yet even before Menchú, a K'iche' Maya, was awarded the gold medallion and $1.2 million in prize money, rumors surfaced in Guatemala that her real story wasn't quite the same as the one she told Burgos-Debray. Among those who began to track down the contradictions was David Stoll, a Stanford anthropology student researching a book in the Ixil area in Guatemala's western highlands, near Menchú's home village of Chimel, outside the town of Uspantán in Quiché Department. In that book, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, Stoll described how Mayas were persuaded by the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) to support armed insurrection, but when push came to shove and the army counterattacked, EGP cadres evaporated and left the Ixil villagers to face the ghastly music alone. Although most of the blood in Ixil country was on the hands of the military, Stoll argued forcefully that the guerrillas and their supporters bore part of the responsibility for the violence.

Stoll enjoys being an iconoclast. A good way to ruin a party among a group of human rights workers and solidarity activists in Guatemala is to mention his name. As he states in his new book, he wants to challenge underlying romantic assumptions about indigenous people and guerrilla warfare. For many on the left, such analysis is unwelcome. Stoll's new book will make him even more the villain.

Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans details the differences between Menchú's published memoirs and the reality of her childhood in Chimel. Stoll's findings are based on interviews with Menchú's relatives and former

neighbors, as well as colleagues, teachers and even Burgos-Debray. Stoll also plowed through mountains of dusty files in the country's agrarian reform ministry in Guatemala City, tracking down documents related to the history Menchú conveyed in her book.

Stoll's informants (whom he unfortunately almost always leaves unnamed) reveal that Menchú's father, Vicente, rather than being the oppressed peasant turned indigenous activist that his daughter portrays, was instead a village leader who cooperated with nonrevolutionary outsiders, including volunteers from the Peace Corps and the Heifer Project. Stoll tells how a major conflict over land, which got Vicente jailed and beaten, was not with ladino land barons as his daughter describes but rather with his indigenous in-laws. The discrepancies continue, including details of how and where Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio was killed, and the details surrounding the violent deaths of her mother and father. Stoll also interviews former schoolmates of Menchú who recall her years of Spanish-language studies in Catholic boarding schools in Uspantán, Guatemala City and the ladino town of Chiantla in Huehuetenango Department--all experiences Menchú had denied in informing Burgos-Debray that she had only recently learned Spanish. Stoll also casts doubt on whether Menchú ever worked at coastal export plantations--a backbreaking labor she eloquently describes in her book--or as a maid to a hard-hearted wealthy woman in the capital. And so on.

Stoll acknowledges that Menchú was not fabricating history out of thin air. What the 23-year-old Menchú related in 1982 was indeed experienced by thousands of her fellow Maya. Her family members had indeed been killed by the military. Yet Stoll claims that the details of her life didn't always fit the picture that Menchú's guerrilla bosses wanted her to paint, so she reinvented her family to personify EGP ideology. If Menchú was to become a Mayan "Everywoman," if her personal saga was to include all the important details of indigenous oppression at the hands of European descendants and foreigners, and, most important, if her story was to motivate foreign readers to support the Guatemalan guerrillas, it was necessary for it to become more than what she had personally experienced. Given that she had been an EGP militant for only about a year at the time of the interview, she had a freshness about her that had yet to be superseded by the doctrinaire discourse of the more experienced party cadre.

Although Burgos-Debray submitted the draft of the book to EGP leaders for their approval, they censored only three minor passages. The guerrilla leaders understood

well that they had nothing to gain by messing with the moving testimony that Burgos-Debray had captured. According to Stoll, the dramatic story told by Menchú lent credibility to the guerrillas and helped keep them alive internationally long after they had been defeated militarily and discredited politically at home.

Although Burgos-Debray acknowledges that the taped interviews were edited and rearranged to make the book, she stands by the veracity of what was published and says she still has the original taped interviews--26 hours of them. Stoll inexplicably listened to only two hours of the tapes, and from that weakly concludes that Burgos-Debray didn't alter the story. Someone needs to listen to all the tapes.

Stoll had formulated the basic outline of this book in the early months of this decade. As he discussed it with friends and colleagues, he was advised to keep it quiet. For a long time he did--not because he was afraid of controversy, but because he believed that embarrassing Menchú during the delicate turns of her country's peace negotiations would only strengthen the hand of the military. But when the war finally ended, he conducted his last interviews and sought a publisher. Stoll says 30 publishers turned him down before Westview Press agreed to take the risk. It was a risk well worth taking, both by Stoll and the publisher.

After two years of official peace, Guatemala continues to wrestle with why the war happened, who caused it, and who kept it going for so long. Many would like the issues to be forgotten. Those who want to remember, such as Catholic Bishop Juan Gerardi, who supervised interviews with thousands of ordinary Mayans in towns much like Chimel and Uspantán, do so at the risk of their lives. Gerardi, killed just two days after he released a landmark report on the violence, believed the future would be better if the truth were told now.

Stoll's frank examination of Rigoberta Menchú's life is the best biography to date of the indigenous leader. Ultimately it is sympathetic to Menchú as a person struggling in a difficult world, and especially to her work in recent years as a peacemaker who broke away from the EGP in an effort to practice at home the nonviolence she preached around the world. The book is an important contribution to the truth. But it is not the last word.

Menchú has yet to address honestly the broad rewriting of her life that occurred in I, *Rigoberta Menchú*. In recent years she has distanced herself somewhat from the book, suggesting at times, for example, that certain errors were the fault of Burgos-

Debray, with whom she has disputed some of the book's royalties. At a January 20 press conference in Mexico, she came close to admitting some of Stoll's charges. "I still have not written my autobiography," she said. "What you have is a testimonial." Menchú declared that she wouldn't "enter into little details," but that she has "a right to my own memories."

Questioned about Stoll's research, she has responded with quips about anthropologists living off the subjects they investigate, and the difficulty that white northerners have in understanding the lives of indigenous peoples in the south. Stoll wrestles with this charge of academic colonialism, and belabors for several pages the torment he has suffered from peers who refuse to countenance his political incorrectness.

Although Stoll's research appears sound, his personal antagonism toward the left, which he wears on both sleeves, leaves him vulnerable to attack. When I talked with him about this book several years ago, he spoke as if his personal mission in life was to bring down Rigoberta Menchú. Although such passion provided the motivation for the years of hard work needed to produce the book, it also raises questions about whether he is simply using Menchú's narrative for his own political ends--which, ironically, in his eyes is the sin of the EGP.

For readers who have watched Guatemalans sort out how to live in peace in recent months, there are no surprises in Stoll's book. For example, many of the guerrilla iniquities of the past that he describes, such as racism toward Guatemala's indigenous majority, can be evidenced today in the composition of the former guerrillas' new political party. What's timely about the book is the opportunity it offers people in the U.S. and Europe to rethink their relations with Guatemalans over the past two decades. If Stoll can help church mission agencies and solidarity groups do that, then he will have done a service to both Rigoberta Menchú and the Maya of Guatemala.