

1-28-1999

## Rigoberta Mechu Answers Questions About Alleged Distortions in 1993 Book

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Rigoberta Mechu Answers Questions About Alleged Distortions in 1993 Book." (1999).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8515>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **Rigoberta Menchu Answers Questions About Alleged Distortions in 1993 Book**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Guatemala*

*Published: 1999-01-28*

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu Tum has come under intense criticism stemming from charges that she falsified events in her life as related in her 1983 book, "Yo, Rigoberta Menchu." US Anthropologist David Stoll wrote in his book, "Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans," that, in relating the story of her family's experiences during the civil war, she included events that did not occur.

Responding to the charges last December, Menchu said academic critics of her book want to "erase the historical memory" of the victims of the Guatemalan civil war. "I am going to defend the book to the death because it is the story of my family in Uspantan, El Quiche [department]," she said. Congressional Deputy Rosalina Tuyuc indirectly accused Stoll and others who have raised questions about the book of racism. "As long as there is no concrete proof to show there were distortions in the events Menchu related, we will continue to believe in her," said Tuyuc.

However, Stoll collected evidence through interviews and official records in the village of Uspantan that appear to support his contention. A separate New York Times investigation in December 1998, which also included interviews with Menchu's former neighbors and her relatives, confirmed much of Stoll's account. Investigations suggest some events never took place. The Times investigation of local land records showed that the Menchu family's struggles regarding land claims a central theme in the book was with relatives and not with wealthy landowners as the book suggests.

The interviews also revealed that a younger brother, whose death is depicted in the book, never existed and that another brother named Nicolas, who the books says had died, is still living in Guatemala. Menchu's assertion that she never went to school is contradicted by nuns who said she was educated on scholarships at Roman Catholic schools through the equivalent of the second year of middle school.

Also questioned is her claim that she worked as a political organizer and worked eight months a year on coffee and cotton plantations during the time she would have been in school. Though no one in her village disputed the suffering and deaths of family members at the hands of Guatemalan security forces, a government clerk in Uspantan told the Times interviewer that the book "is one lie after another." At one time, Menchu said she was not the author of the book and final responsibility for it rested with anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos, who wrote the book from taped interviews with Menchu.

However, in her new book, "Crossing Borders," Menchu says she had final authority over the manuscript of "Yo, Rigoberta Menchu" and edited out parts she did not want to appear in the book. In mid-January, Menchu held a press conference in Mexico City to defend the veracity of events

such as the deaths of her parents that were not in dispute while giving few details on the events that have been questioned. However, she admitted for the first time that she had attended school.

Asked about the discovery that her brother Nicolas was alive, she said it was a younger brother, also named Nicolas, who died. However, Nicolas, 10 years older than Rigoberta, told the Times he had no recollection of such a brother. Stoll said he never said Menchu was a liar, and he defended her book as an attempt to relate the story of all Maya in Guatemala. "You can understand and defend her narrative strategy, of folding others' experience into her own," said Stoll. "She was in an emergency situation. She was trying to bring down pressure on the government and the army. To do that, you have to make a complicated situation seem simple."

In her Mexico City remarks, Menchu seemed to agree with Stoll. She said the book was not an autobiography but a "collective memory" of her people. "I have a right to a historical memory, a right to my memory as a woman and as a Guatemalan." (Sources: CNN, 12/17/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/04/99; Notimex, 01/20/99; The New York Times, 01/15/99, 01/21/99; Associated Press, 01/22/99)

-- End --