Nobel Winner Rejects 'Unjust' Allegations That She Lied

Calvin Reid -- 3/8/1999

Speaking through an interpreter at a press conference in New York City on February 11, Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, rejected charges that she lied about her background in I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, the 1982 book that focused international attention on the country's bloody civil war. Forced to address the mounting controversy about the veracity of her account, Menchú called her 1982 book "a testimony, not a biography" and indicated that she is currently conducting research to write a genuine autobiography. She dismissed the recent allegations as "an unjust campaign to destroy my name." Last year, Menchú published Crossing Borders (Verso), a continuation of her life story after she received the Nobel Prize. Since its publication in 1982 by Gallimard, I, Rigoberta Menchú has sold more than 500,000 copies worldwide. According to Verso, the book's current publisher, it is a fixture in college courses on Latin America and continues to sell nearly 40,000 copies a year in trade paper. The book and her work in support of indigenous peasants led to Menchú being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Allegations that she lied about her background surfaced in December 1998 in a New York Times article based on research collected by David Stoll, an anthropologist at Middlebury College in Vermont, and published in his new book, Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, from Westview Press, an imprint of Perseus Books. Stoll's book charges, among other things, that Menchú's account of a conflict between powerless Indians and brutal landlords is not true, that the land dispute depicted in the book was actually between different factions of her own family and that while her story of the deaths of two of her brothers is true, her published version is misleading. He also claims that although Menchú has portrayed herself as an illiterate Indian plantation worker, she really attended elite schools and was better educated and far more privileged than she has made known.

Both the New York Times article and Stoll's book have provoked a firestorm of debate. Karl Yambert, Stoll's editor at Westview, said the book, which has been back to press three times and now has more than 10,000 copies in print, has been "attacked from both sides." Stoll, who considers himself a critic from the left, has been attacked by left-wing commentators as an apologist for the political right out to undermine a great symbol of peasant liberation. Conservative political commentators have called Menchú a liar who has concocted a romantic tale of third-world class war to attract international left-wing sympathy.

At the press conference, Menchú said that when the book came out in 1982, "I had to convince the world to look at the atrocities committed in Guatemala." Menchú dismissed charges that she attended "elite" schools, claiming that she received only the most basic instruction in literacy -- without any formal credit -- after hours, while working as a maid in a convent school when she was 16. Although she admitted that she did not personally witness the death of one of her brothers as she described, she claims to have used the eyewitness accounts of others who were present. Menchú also claimed that the Menchú family land dispute ended in 1966 and was "a small part" of the conflict.

Stoll told PW that his book was an attempt to "modify but not change how we look at Guatemala." He was emphatic that Menchú's 1982 book "is not a hoax. That is not the case I'm making. She is not a liar. She's a genuine victim who lost four members of her family to the security forces." According to Stoll, I, Rigoberta Menchú is "a very useful book" that has been "interpreted too literally. It is not an eyewitness account. But it is so attractive to foreign readers that it overshadows other Mayan peasants' perspective on the Guatemalan civil war."

According to Stoll, Menchú's 1982 book "simplified" the situation in Guatemala, "which was a defensible strategy in 1982, to drum up international pressure to stop army abuses." However, Stoll noted that Menchú's responses at the press conference were "not candid." He said that she did receive formal credit at four educational institutions in Guatemala. One institution, he added, was a special accelerated work and study program for bright girls at a convent school where she did work as a maid and received formal credit. Also, despite Menchú's comments at the press conference, Stoll told PW that the land dispute was purely between Menchú's in-laws until her parents were killed by the army in 1980. There was only one short-lived dispute with a landowner, Stoll said, which was resolved by government mediation (and accepted by the landowner) in her father's favor in 1970.

Despite the controversy and accusations over the book, Stoll is quick to praise Menchú's role in Guatemalan history: "I have respect for what has happened to her. People who know Guatemala know that her story is true in some sense. I defend her right to dramatize her story in 1982 and my right to criticize it as a scholar in 1998."