

Rigoberta Menchú Tum

Rigoberta Menchú Tum was born on January 9, 1959 to a Quiche-Maya peasant family in the highlands of northwestern Guatemala. Her father, Vicente Menchu, was a community leader and her mother, Juana Tum, was a midwife and a traditional healer.

Rigoberta was the sixth of nine children. Her childhood memories are of a small homestead in the mountains of Guatemala, where her family lived and farmed. Most years, Rigoberta's family had to leave their community for six months to work on cotton and coffee plantations that lined the southern coast of Guatemala.

During the cold war, the United States was fearful of communism, and the CIA supported the overthrow of the democratically elected socialist government in Guatemala, which sparked 36 years of civil war. During this time, over 200,000 Guatemalans were killed, among them Rigoberta's father, mother, two brothers, sister-in-law, and three nieces and nephews. The military destroyed over 450 Maya villages, displacing over 1 million Maya.

As a member of Committee of the Peasant Union (CUC), Rigoberta played a major role in the 1980 farm worker strike for better conditions. She also participated in large demonstrations in the capital in 1981, and, as a member of the 31st of January Popular Front, helped educate Indian peasants on techniques for resisting military oppression. When her efforts caught the military's attention, she was targeted for arrest and was forced to go into hiding. In 1981, when it became impossible for her to remain in Guatemala, she fled to Mexico.

In exile, Rigoberta became the world spokesperson for her people, and a powerful voice against the oppression they suffered at the hands of the right-wing military. She participated in founding The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG) in 1982. In 1983, she told her life story to Elisabeth Burgos Debray. The resulting book, whose English title is *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, attracted considerable international attention to the atrocities being committed against the indigenous Maya. Following the release of the book, Rigoberta joined the National Coordinating Committee of the CUC in 1986.

In 1992 Rigoberta Menchú Tum was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her work for the rights of indigenous people. She was the first indigenous person ever to receive the award and one of only a handful of women to ever win it. Significantly, she was awarded the prize on the 500th anniversary of Columbus landing in America.

After the civil war ended, Rigoberta fought to have the Guatemalan political and military establishment tried in a court of law. As it was almost impossible to try these people in Guatemala, she filed in a Spanish court in 1999. After refusing to take action for some time, the Spanish courts finally agreed to try the case and in December, 2006 they called for the extradition of seven former members of the Guatemalan military government on charges of torture and genocide against the Mayan people.

Rigoberta also became actively involved in the Mexican pharmaceutical industry, trying to provide inexpensive generic drugs to all in need. She is the President of Salud para Todos ("Health for All") and the company "Farmacias Similares". In 2004 she accepted President Óscar Berger's offer to help implement the country's peace accords and took on the role of goodwill ambassador. In 2007, Rigoberta Menchú Tum ran for President of Guatemala, finishing sixth in the first round of the elections.