

**Farewell to the Community: Rigoberta Decides to Learn Spanish and Political Activity in Other Communities. Contacts with Ladinos** *from I, Rigoberta Menchu*

By Rigoberta Menchu

...When I joined the CUC [*Comite de Unidad Campesina or Committee of the Peasant Union*] in 1979, I was given various tasks to do and I became one of the organization's leaders. I traveled to different areas and slept in the houses of different companeros, and what I found most distressing was that we couldn't understand each other. They couldn't speak Spanish and I couldn't speak their language. I felt so helpless. I'd ask myself how was this possible? It's a division which they have kept up precisely so that we Indians cannot unite, or discuss our problems. And how effective a barrier it has been! But I understood why now. I began learning Mam, I began learning Cakchiquel and Tzutuhil. I decided to learn these three languages as well as Spanish. I didn't speak very well. Oh, I made so many mistakes! And of course I couldn't read or write, so learning Spanish meant listening and memorizing, like a cassette. The same with the other languages; I couldn't write them either. So for a while I got everything mixed up. Learning to read and write, learning Spanish and three other languages—my own as well—was all very confusing. I began to wonder whether it wasn't better to learn first one and then another. Since Spanish was a language which united us, why learn all the twenty-two languages in Guatemala? It wasn't possible, and anyway this wasn't the moment to do it.

It was at this period that I was traveling all over the place. I also went down to the coast. I had some political work to do, organizing the people there, and at the same time getting them to understand me by telling them about my past, what had happened to me in my life, the reasons for the pain we suffer, and the causes of poverty. When you know there is work to do and you are responsible, you try and do it as well as you can because you have suffered so much and you don't want your people to go on suffering. I knew all the contacts, and I had many jobs to do; carrying papers, machines, leaflets, texts for teaching people. I remember that the texts for learning Spanish and learning to read and write were full of drawings, figures and designs. That is, it wasn't only writing because writing didn't mean much to me and I didn't understand what it said. At the same time, I was going to a convent where the nuns taught me to read and write. They also taught me Spanish. As I was saying before, not all priests are people who can't see the reality and suffering of the people. Many of them love the people and, through this love for the people, they love each one of us and help us show our people the way. I have many good memories of many nuns who have helped me. They took me by the hand like a child who, well, who needed to learn many things. And I was anxious to do my best, to learn a lot. Because I believe my life has taught me many things but human beings are also made to learn many more. I learned Spanish out of necessity.

**Political Activity in Other Communities. Contacts with Ladinos** *from I, Rigoberta Menchu*

*"We have revealed our secrets to those who are worthy. Only they should know the art of writing with no-one else."*



-Popol Vuh

We went on organizing our people in 1979. I remember that I hadn't heard anything of my parents since the farewell in the community. I didn't know where they were. They had no news of me either. We didn't see them for a long time. I went to the fincas, I went to other areas, but I couldn't go back to my village because I was a fugitive like my parents. We lived with other people, with companeros from other Indian groups, and with the many friends I made in the organization. It was almost as if I were living with my brothers and sisters, with my parents. Everyone showed me so much affection. So we organized the majority of workers on the South coast, in the sugar, coffee and cotton plantations. And they agreed to carry on the political work when they returned to the Altiplano so that everybody would be organized. Most of the workers were Indians and poor ladinos, and we didn't need to hold courses explaining the situation since it was all around us. Our work went very well. And soon there just wasn't enough time for everything; we had to rush from one place to another, carrying documents, carrying everything. The reason for this was so that others wouldn't put themselves at risk; we were already in danger, the enemy knew us. I traveled from region to region, sleeping in different houses.

All this gave me a lot to think about, a lot, because I came across the linguistic barriers over and over again. We couldn't understand each other and I wanted so much to talk to everybody and feel close to many of the women as I was to my mother. But I couldn't talk to them because they didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. So I said: "We can't possibly go on like this. We must work to help people understand their own people, and be able to talk to one another." From then on I concentrated on getting to know my companeros closely and teaching them the little I knew, so that they too could become leaders of their communities. I remember we talked of many things: of our role as women, our role as young people. We all came to the conclusion that we hadn't had a childhood, nor had we ever really been young because, as we were growing up we'd had the responsibility of feeding little brothers and sisters—it was like having a lot of children ourselves.