5

The Death of Petrocinio

My mother was weeping; she was looking at her son.
—*I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p. 177

With problems cropping up in Rigoberta's testimony, readers may ask, How reliable are your own sources? Perhaps many of the people I interviewed have some reason to discredit Rigoberta or her father. Or perhaps they did not like being questioned and misled me. In some of the chapters that follow, disagreements among my Uspantán sources will become evident. Whom are we to believe? If there are disagreements, might not the stories I gathered be as unreliable as Rigoberta's? Perhaps they are even less reliable: While Rigoberta was presumably free to tell her story in Paris, peasants in Guatemala must still reckon with the power of the Guatemalan army. Maybe the truth is unknowable, because the milieu is too ambiguous and fraught with repression to have confidence in any particular version.

The hardest question to answer—and the one running through the next five chapters—is to what extent peasants like the Menchús supported the guerrillas. Fortunately, many survivors are not mute on the subject, and their accounts suggest certain conclusions, even if these should remain tentative. Explanations for why peasants collaborate with insurgents can be summarized under three headings. Perhaps peasants are inspired by revolutionary ideology, that is, the idea of transforming society. Or perhaps, without giving much credence to such visions, they think they have something more immediate to gain. Or perhaps they are pressured into cooperating with the guerrillas, after being swept up in a process of provocation, retaliation, and polarization that forces them to choose sides.[1]

Skeptics who doubt guerrillas have the broad support they claim favor the pressure-and-polarization model. This became my preferred theory after interviewing peasants in what was reputed to have been a guerrilla stronghold. Many Ixils told me they had been attracted to the revolution-

ary vision, of a society where they would be equal with ladinos. But they began joining the guerrillas in numbers only after the army's reprisals forced them to defend themselves.[2] In secret the EGP had launched the process of induction some years earlier, by setting up a network of collaborators who did not reveal themselves to neighbors until guerrilla columns passed through and held a rally. Soon after that, the army's reaction presented fence-sitters with a fait accompli. Certainly some Ixils joined for ideological or pragmatic reasons, but the larger forces at work meant that that they or their neighbors were simultaneously being obliged to join. Once the army started kidnapping suspects, peasants could choose only between cooperating with one of the two sides, at the risk of being murdered by the other, or fleeing their homes.

Scholars who are more sympathetic to guerrillas tend to stress the ideological explanation: that peasants join an insurgency because they see it as a way to fight exploitation and build a better society. This is also how guerrilla movements see themselves, in terms of the immiseration thesis. Peasants face ever worsening oppression, which raises their consciousness and leads them to embrace armed struggle. As it happens, immiseration is not a good description of the conditions that highland peasants faced before the war. Instead, compared with the harsh conditions recalled by elders, they perceived mild improvements and hoped for more in the future.[3] Yet this did not prevent coteries of Ixils—including adventurous youth, students, and political activists—from welcoming the guerrillas at an early date, whether because of specific grievances (such as the theft of an election) or broader frustrations, neither of which was in short supply under a-military dictatorship.

The same could be true of Uspantán and Vicente Menchú. Even if he was not the persecuted agrarian radical of his daughter's story, even if he was fairly well-off for a man of his origin, that does not disqualify him as a potential revolutionary. To the contrary, future revolutionaries have often experienced some success before they collide with injustice. Perhaps Vicente supported the guerrillas not because he was among the most oppressed but because he identified with them and thought that armed struggle was the only way to help them. This is a reasonable reinterpretation of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, minus some of the melodrama, which retains its essential claim of a revolutionary peasantry. But is it true? Alternatively, could Vicente have thought that he had something to gain from the guerrillas, without giving too much credence to their larger vision? Or following the pressure-and-polarization model that I argued in the case of Ixil country, could he have been swept up by forces beyond his control?

In the previous three chapters, we looked at what can be gathered about the situation of Chimel before the violence, its relations with ladino and K'iche' neighbors, and how the first political killings occurred. This is an es-

sential basis for understanding how Vicente and his people responded to the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. Over the next five chapters, I will take up other key episodes and topics that bear on this difficult question. They include the army's murder of one of Vicente's sons and how he responded to it; the death of Vicente himself, along with thirty-five other people, at a protest in Guatemala City; his relation to the Committee for Campesino Unity and to the Guerrilla Army of the Poor; and how the violence destroyed Chimel.

The evidence bearing on these subjects is not slight. It includes other revolutionary accounts as well as Rigoberta's, human rights reports, press stories, and transcripts of interviews with peasant protesters, including Vicente. It also includes my interviews with survivors of these events. Since they do not always agree with each other, it would be best to treat their recollections neither as settled facts nor as unreliable, but as what my colleague Paul Kobrak calls "reconstructions of the violence," expressions of how people situate themselves in relation to a traumatic period. This is a view of history from the village level, through the eyes of peasants, whose very limitations will suggest how they experienced the war.[4] As for the factuality of my conclusions, I do think some issues can be settled by comparing sources, but others lead only to more and less likely scenarios. If what results is more reliable than Rigoberta's account, the reason is that it encompasses a wider range of versions, deals with contradictions that she does not, and acknowledges more of what cannot be established.

To show the advantages of the method, let us compare contradictory versions of how Rigoberta's brother Petrocinio died at the town of Chajul. It is there that Rigoberta places the calvary of her younger brother, in the climactic chapter of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. By 1979, according to her account, Chimel is fully organized and most of her family is in hiding. Her father has gone underground in the Committee for Campesino Unity, while Rigoberta is doing her own organizing in the Department of Huehuetenango. Remaining behind in Chimel is Petrocinio, a sixteen-year-old serving as the community secretary. He is kidnapped on September 9, while on an organizing trip to another village, after a member of the community betrays him to the army for a small sum of money. With Petrocinio at the time are a girl and her mother; they risk their lives to follow him and his captors to the army camp, where twenty other prisoners are already subject to gruesome tortures.

Immediately the Menchú family reassembles. The army announces that it will carry out a public punishment of the guerrillas it has captured, in Chajul, and it summons the populace to witness the spectacle. Overnight Rigoberta and her family hurry through the mountains. Chajul is twenty-five kilometers from Chimel—on a clear day its huge church can be descried from a nearby ridge—but it is farther over the mountain trails that loop in and out of ravines. The most conservative of the three Ixil towns,

with few ladinos and relatively little Spanish spoken, Chajul has hallowed associations for traditional Catholics. Every Lent, from as far away as Mexico and El Salvador, thousands of pilgrims converge on its whitewashed colonial church to worship a larger-than-life statue of Christ staggering under his cross and imploring heaven.

The Menchús join the crowd in the plaza just as soldiers drag Petrocinio and the other prisoners off an army truck. Wearing army uniforms, the captives are ordered to stand in line but can barely hold themselves up, so hideously have they been tortured. Petrocinio's head has been shaved and slashed; he has no fingernails left, nor soles on his feet, and his wounds are suppurating from infection. As an army officer harangues the crowd on the evils of communism, he orders his soldiers to scissors off the prisoners' clothes, to explain how each mark was inflicted on the tortured bodies. Finally, the officer orders each prisoner soaked in gasoline. As they cry for mercy, they are set afire. The horror stirs the crowd to rage; many raise their machetes and rush the soldiers, who fall back shouting slogans to army and fatherland.[5]

The White Flower Protest

In Guatemala City, seeking to rescue his son, Vicente would describe him as Chimel's secretary. "He always has the notes for all that land that we are soliciting, maybe just for that they took him. And as he already knows how to read and everything, sometimes he talks a bit about injustice."[6] A Catholic eulogy refers to him as a literacy worker at a school that he and his father obtained for Chimel.[7] But in Uspantán I heard Petrocinio remembered only as a youth who might have had a bit of schooling, not as a village catechist, secretary, or organizer. He is presumed to have been *agarrado* (grabbed) because he was within reach at a time when his family was being blamed for the EGP raid on Soch. Perhaps with little intimation of danger, as no one from Chimel had been kidnapped, his father asked him to buy sugar at the Sunday market. The date was September 9, 1979. Spotted by informers, he left the plaza and was walking ahead of his girlfriend and her mother, toward their village, when soldiers and vigilantes ran him down near the town's Calvary chapel. Because shots were fired, some think he put up enough resistance to be shot and wounded.

"Yes, it's my son," Vicente told a journalist in the capital four months later, just a few days before he went to the Spanish embassy. "It was November 9 [*sic*] at three in the afternoon, there in the town of Uspantán, it wasn't in [our] house, they grabbed him in the street. . . . When they grabbed him, I wasn't there. . . . As he's already engaged, his girlfriend was with him and the señora, the mother of the girl. In front of them they grabbed him and took him to the garrison of Uspantán."[8]

Petrocinio was last seen being dragged in the direction of the army camp at Xejul, just east of town along the road to Alta Verapaz. When I visited the site, long after the army's departure, I was struck by how indefensible it seemed in military terms. Instead of being on a knoll, the usual location for an army garrison, it was in a woodlot at a low point, as if defense against attack were no concern. The location suggests that it was intended only as a torture camp. So do the stories about mutilated bodies that were trucked out to be dumped elsewhere. Other victims are presumed to be there still, in pits that have been filled but are still visible among the trees. Fourteen years later some of Petrocinio's relatives suspected that he was still there, at the bottom of one of them.

Even though men wearing uniforms had taken Rigoberta's brother and the other victims, army officers denied any knowledge of their whereabouts. The local army commander refused to meet with the families, as did the commander in Santa Cruz del Quiché, the interior minister, and President Lucas García.[9] An army communiqué suggests the level of denial that the villagers faced: "Undoubtedly the false accusations victimizing the Army of Guatemala are nothing but the product of . . . subversive groups that frequently assassinate their own comrades . . . who are no longer useful for their evil-minded purposes. Or these are self-kidnappings, from which they obtain the same . . . lucrative profits. . . . The Army of Guatemala reiterates that it is at the service of the Fatherland and never at the service of particular persons. . . . It will continue zealously fulfilling its constitutional duty, so as not to permit that our democratic system be undermined, much less permit that the nation fall into the hands of international communism."[10]

Because local commanders adopted noms de guerre, their identity is for the most part unknown to Uspantanos. But the occasional officer developed friendships, or years later his face and name appeared in newspapers. Such is the case of Carlos Roberto Ochoa Ruiz, a captain who was apparently second in command at Xejul when Petrocinio died and who left shortly after the fire at the Spanish embassy. Thirteen years later he was a lieutenant colonel under indictment for smuggling half a metric ton of cocaine to Florida.[11]

There were two occasions when Rigoberta's family and neighbors unquestionably lived up to her portrayal, when they went to the capital in September 1979, and again in January 1980, to protest the army's kidnappings. On the first occasion, fifty campesinos arrived in the capital and spent the night at the headquarters of the Guatemalan Workers Federation (FTG). The next morning, carrying white flowers to signify their peaceful intentions, they entered the national congress in small groups and demanded the right to speak. Accompanying them were urban allies from the FTG, the Robin García Revolutionary Student Front (FERG), and

the Democratic Front Against Repression, for a total of sixty people. Security guards barred the way to the legislative chamber; hostile deputies upbraided them. Eventually the protesters were ushered upstairs to a committee room, where they were allowed to speak.

The delegation had not been received warmly, but at least it caught the attention of the press. Then the situation turned ominous. Hundreds of soldiers and riot police surrounded the building. After congressmen escorted the protesters back to the FTG's union hall, the security forces surrounded that building as well. Five students and union activists ventured outside to buy food, only to be taken away by heavily armed plainclothesmen.[12] The following evening two hundred more demonstrators broke through the diminished police cordon, loaded the campesinos onto trucks, and brought them to San Carlos University, a stronghold of the left, from which they returned to Uspantán escorted by journalists and student leaders.

The Menchús and their neighbors were not the first peasant delegation to protest army kidnappings, but the press was so muzzled during these years that, thanks to their urban allies and the bold tactic of occupying the congress, this one received unusual attention. The statement for congress suggests that it was written by the delegation's urban allies, not the peasants themselves, most of whom were illiterate. Before listing the victims and relating how pleas for their release have been rejected, the statement blames the repression on the three sons of Honorio García and an in-law who want to rob their land. It makes no reference to the EGP's presence in Uspantán or the assassination of Honorio and Eliu Martínez.[13]

At a press conference just before the peasants returned to Uspantán, several of them voiced complaints in their own words. They talked about the gamut of security forces persecuting them, not just the army and the mobile military police but the treasury guards (who were switching from persecuting moonshiners to kidnapping guerrilla suspects) and even a *guardia forestal*, which was supposed to protect forest cover. Once again, there was no reference to the assassinations of Honorio García and Eliu Martínez, nor to the dispute over the path to San Pablo. One campesino denied having organizational ties with students, and he also denied that they were in opposition to the army or the government. They just wanted to be left in peace, he said—which the never-mentioned guerrillas were guaranteeing would never happen. The generic nature of the complaints suggests that the particularities of Uspantán were already being swallowed by the left's national-level discourse against the army.[14]

How Petrocinio Died at Chajul

From a military truck they threw down the cadavers, one by one, one by one. I think there were seven. They [soldiers] rang the church bells and summoned the people, to say that [the dead] were guerrillas. The army also said that they were from San Miguel Uspantán. To make the people afraid, to make an example [of the victims], but the people only got angrier. Yes, they burned a body. But he was already dead; he wasn't alive.

—Testimony from Chajul, 1994

When I started visiting Chajul regularly in 1987, it was not hard to hear stories about the violence. People told me how the army used to hang accused guerrilla collaborators from the balcony of the town hall. Usually this was done at night, enabling the town's volunteer ambulance brigade to take the bodies down at dawn, but not always. One unfortunate woman was arrested for trading with the enemy after soldiers and civil patrollers fell into an ambush. Brought onto the balcony before a crowd, she asked for mercy, then for a last chance to nurse her infant. After she nursed the baby, it was taken from her, and she was put over the side like dozens of others.

True to Rigoberta's account, it was not rare for the army to humiliate and torture captives before they were killed, even in front of their families. Nor was it unknown for the army to burn people alive—usually when they were trapped inside their houses. But when I brought up Rigoberta's story of prisoners being burned alive in the plaza of Chajul, all I harvested were quizzical looks. Prisoners from Uspantán were killed early in the violence, townspeople confirmed, but what they recalled was rather different. One man remembered seeing five or six cadavers, dressed in military clothes and next to old shotguns, a kilometer out of town toward the army garrison. A helicopter had brought the men before they were killed: The army claimed that they were guerrillas from Uspantán attacking Chajul.[15]

To some readers, an exegesis of exactly how Rigoberta's brother died will seem pointless or naive. Given the vagaries of memory and the translation of eyewitness accounts into secondhand ones, it is hardly surprising that there are conflicting versions. Perhaps my sources in Chajul were still too afraid of the Guatemalan army to acknowledge what they had witnessed. So why is their version of events more credible than Rigoberta's? The reason is that a peasant delegation, including Rigoberta's father, was communicating the Chajules' version of events soon afterward in a second round of protests in the capital in January 1980.

"On December 6," the delegation announced with the help of the Democratic Front Against Repression (FDCR), ". . . the army brought to Chajul seven campesinos whom it had kidnapped in Chicamán,[16] dressed them all in olive green and forced them to go up the road that leads to town. A few meters away, soldiers were hidden and shot at the seven campesinos

until they were all dead. After that, the army threw down a pair of old shotguns without ammunition next to the cadavers and began to say that the dead were guerrillas who had wanted to attack the garrison in Chajul. The cadavers lay there for many hours, until they were put in two holes in the Chajul cemetery, after [the army] burned one of the bodies with gasoline."[17]

The construction of this version of events can be seen in a fascinating interview that Vicente's delegation gave in the capital, five days before the death of many of its members at the Spanish embassy. Vicente had yet to accept that his son was really dead: "I don't know if they are alive or if they [soldiers] already killed them." Then a Chajul campesino interjected the delegation's version of events—except that townspeople are summoned to witness the execution of the seven in front of the church. Other members of the delegation insisted that the seven were killed on the road into town, as my sources described in the late 1980s and early 1990s, then dumped in the plaza to dramatize one of the army's antiguerrilla harangues. The reason the delegation believed that the seven were from Uspantán was that the army said so.[18] The bodies were never positively identified, hence Vicente's uncertainty about whether his son was among them. With only minor variations, this is the same version of events that appeared in human rights reports, with the EGP's Mario Payeras adding that the army was retaliating for a guerrilla ambush.[19]

In and of itself, the contrast between Rigoberta's account and everyone else's is not very significant. Except for sensational details, Rigoberta's version follows the others and can be considered factual. She is correct that the army brought prisoners to Chajul, claimed that they were guerrillas, and murdered them to intimidate the population. As best anyone can determine, they included her younger brother.

The important point is not that what really happened differs somewhat from what Rigoberta says happened. The important point is that her story, here and at other critical junctures, is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be. Although she presents her parents, siblings, and self at the scene, Vicente was professing ignorance about the fate of his son shortly before his own death. The Chajules only supposed that the seven victims were from Uspantán because the army said so. In short, no relatives were on hand to identify them, and Rigoberta was not there either.[20]

6

The Massacre at the Spanish Embassy

Since then, the dead combatants have stretched out in their immense metallic forms and our action has followed new courses.

—**Mario Payeras, *El Trueno en la Ciudad*, 1987**[1]

Taking hostages at embassies and government ministries is a common form of protest in Latin America. Even repressed or indifferent news media pay attention. In 1978 the Sandinistas captured the entire congress of Nicaragua to dramatize their struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. An archbishop agreed to mediate, Somoza released political prisoners, and the guerrillas departed heroically from the airport to international acclaim. But the tactic can go terribly wrong. When guerrillas seized the Colombian supreme court in 1985, the army responded with tanks. All forty-one militants died, along with twelve justices. Another occupation that ended disastrously was in Guatemala City on January 31, 1980. Masked protesters took over the Spanish embassy to protest government repression, whereupon the police stormed it. Thirty-six people—all but two of the occupiers and hostages—died in a mysterious conflagration.

To this day, it is not agreed who started the fire at the Spanish embassy. But the holocaust was not a defeat for the revolutionary movement. Because the police assaulted the building over the protests of the Spanish ambassador, the Guatemalan government was held responsible for a violation of diplomatic immunity and the deaths of the people inside. Like no other event, the fire captured the brutality of the security forces and played it out in front of television cameras. The violation of international law was so flagrant that it made the Lucas García regime an international pariah. Within Guatemala, the massacre became a powerful symbol for pulling together a broad revolutionary coalition. The dead protesters were remembered as peasants struggling to protect their families from government kidnappers. They became exemplary victims, martyrs whose