Guatemala is a country located in Central America and shares borders with Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras. A high percentage of Guatemala’s population is indigenous Maya, meaning that they have lived in Guatemala before the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1500s. From 1960-1996, Guatemala had a civil war where the indigenous Maya fought for their right to land. During this war, the government’s military fought against and killed thousands of indigenous Guatemalans. One of the most important figures of the civil war was Rigoberta Menchú.
Rigoberta Menchú was born into a Maya family in 1959. She spent her childhood helping her parents and siblings on the family farm plot and traveling to big coffee plantations to help pick coffee to provide money for her family. As the civil war began, Menchú became involved in organizations working to help the indigenous people who were persecuted by the government. Menchú taught herself Spanish and helped with a movement to improve working conditions for indigenous farmers and rights for women. She also organized demonstrations to help educate indigenous people about their rights.

When the government became angry with Menchú because she was helping the indigenous people, she had to flee to Mexico in order to stay safe in 1981. While she was living in exile in Mexico, she shared her story with the media. Newspapers around the world began to write about Menchú and the struggle the Maya people were facing from
their government. During the rest of the civil war, Menchú kept returning to Guatemala to advocate for the indigenous people only to be forced back to Mexico for safety reasons. To honor her efforts advocating for indigenous people’s rights, Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Since the end of the civil war, Menchú has been active in Guatemala working on expanding the rights of indigenous people. She has also joined with other female recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize to advocate for women’s rights around the world.