

WORLD/NATIONAL NEWS

Guyana's Jewish first lady

By LARRY LUXNER
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GEORGETOWN, Guyana — Janet Rosenberg Jagan has made history as the first Jewish "first lady" of Guyana — a nearly bankrupt former British colony on the northeastern shoulder of South America.

A longtime Marxist, this veteran politician and member of Parliament is the wife of newly elected President Cheddi Jagan, who defeated the country's incumbent, Desmond Hoyte, in elections Oct. 5.

The balloting was monitored by a team of international observers, including former President Jimmy Carter.

In a recent living-room interview, Janet Jagan explained how a nice Jewish girl such as herself became entangled in Guyanese politics.

"I grew up in Chicago, where my parents were Reform Jews," she said. "My father later moved to Detroit because of the anti-Semitism in Chicago, then migrated to California. Cheddi and I met in Chicago in 1943. I was at the Cook County School of Nursing, and he had just completed his doctorate in dentistry at Northwestern University."

Toward the end of World War II, the couple married and relocated to Cheddi Jagan's native land, then known as British Guiana. In 1946, they became active in the trade union movement, and four years later inaugurated the Marxist-oriented People's Progressive Party — ultimately winning elections in 1953, 1957 and 1961.

Throughout the couple's house in Georgetown are reminders of that per-

iod — framed photos, certificates, a silver menorah given to the Jagans by former Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

"When we launched the party, our major aim was to achieve independence," said Janet Jagan, who is 72,

"Many times, I've been the only person of Jewish origin in this country, and that's been frequently used against me."

Janet Rosenberg Jagan

two years younger than her husband.

After independence, however, the PPP never won another election — until now. Jagan blames that partly on vote-rigging and partly on what she described as interference from the American CIA throughout much of the 1960s.

At one time, Washington considered Cheddi Jagan almost as dangerous as Fidel Castro. For years, Guyanese anti-communists tried to link Janet Jagan's family with that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for wartime espionage against the United States.

Those accusations, she says, were a form of anti-Semitism, not much different than the kind she experienced growing up in Chicago.

"Many times, I've been the only person of Jewish origin in this country,

and that's been frequently used against me. I remember a newspaper headline which once referred to me as 'White Jew Lady.'"

Guyana is the only country in South America without any Jewish community. Even Suriname and French Guiana have small Jewish populations, and Suriname — Guyana's neighbor to the east — boasts the continent's oldest synagogue.

For years, Guyana was part of the anti-Israel voting bloc at the United Nations, often courting the friendship of such nations as Libya, North Korea and the Soviet Union. But earlier this year, following the collapse of Soviet communism, Guyana reversed itself and re-established diplomatic relations with Israel.

In the meantime, a softening of attitudes by both Cheddi Jagan and the U.S. government made the dentist-turned-politician more palatable to Guyanese voters.

But Cheddi Jagan's victory is only the beginning. He now inherits a crumbling economy that has seen the Guyanese dollar devalued almost 100 percent in the past few years, and a country racked by racial intolerance and what many describe as questionable human-rights practices by the rival People's National Congress.

Janet Jagan, one of eight PPP representatives in Guyana's 53-seat Parliament, said that despite the couple's Marxist beliefs, her husband will encourage Americans and other foreigners to invest in Guyana — particularly in utilities, road-building, basic industry and tourism. ■