The Jewish grandmother from America,
The President of Guyana
by Woody Segal/Inyana

The title "Madam President" is a refreshing kind of expression which causes one who grew up in a male dominated society i.e. throughout the globe, to prick up their ears. Toward the end of the second millennium, the feminist revolution had not always succeeded in reaping its fruit. The prime positions remained in the hands of the strong gender.

Here and there are some exceptions and I am on my way to one of them. I am driving on a road in need of repair leading from the only deserted airport of Georgetown, the capital of Guyana - the only state in South America in which English is the official language - to the city itself. Through the window of the speeding car one can see tin huts and pitiful villages against a backdrop of a tropical jungle which covers the major part of the country. During my journey I looked at the inhabitants: 53% are descendants of the workers on sugar plantations that the British brought over, 35% are black and descendants of the slaves who were transferred throughout the British colonies, and they all have a woman as President by the name of Janet Rosenberg-Jagan. She is 77 years old and in December 1997 she was newly elected as President of Guyana, a state which is situated along the Atlantic Ocean in South America. Its area is equal to that of Britain but 80% of it is covered by forests.

Janet Rosenberg-Jagan, "Madam President", is a white, American, Jewish grandmother who rules over Guyana, despite the fact that there are hardly any Jews, American or white living there. Her hair is as white as snow and she usually wears short flowery dresses which help her to cope with the humidity and the tropical heat.

"My family were never orthodox but I have never denied my Jewish origins" says the President in a special interview for Ma'ariv.

"There are no Jews here other than myself. In the past there were some Jews who worked in diamonds, there was one Jew in Surinam, I think, and perhaps a few others in Barbados in the last century, but here there are none. During most of the years I have been here I was the only Jew in the whole country.

Although she has not hidden her Jewish identity, the contacts that she has with Israel are very tenuous. She is definitely not crazy about Netanyahu.

Of the population of this little state - 700,000 inhabitants in all, 200,000 live in the capital, Georgetown. The majority of the town houses are wooden, one storeyed and are perched on stilts in fear of flood. There are not many multi-storeyed houses in the town but one can find the odd one here and there. If one were to try hard one could even come across a traffic jam. Because in the last few years economists saw some progress in the country's shaky economy, it is possible today to see more cars on the streets than ever before in the past - most of them old or Japanese, but the common denominator is that all are cheap.

The gate of the presidential palace reminds one of the large gate in Zriffin in front of which careless security checks awaited us. After some minutes, we were inside marching among the wooden barracks on a pavement where the majority of the paving stones were broken. The President received the guests warmly and listened.

The first question: "How did it happen that a white Jewish girl from Chicago has become the President of this jungle area republic?"
“I don’t know” ponders Jagan. “Perhaps I arrived here because I was a Jewess from the USA and in the 1930s and 40s, it was not an easy experience. There were so many prejudices and I could not live an ordinary American life. There were so many Jew haters around. I recall as a child that my parents used to plan vacations. Many places which we wanted to visit were not accessible because Jews and dogs were barred. Maybe this is what turned me into a fighter for human rights and to choose a political route which brought me to where I am now.”

Janet Rosenberg was born in 1920 in Chicago to Jewish American parents. “My parents were very American,” she says, Ivery non-religious. Perhaps because we lived in a Jewish free area and because my father’s family were third generation American so they went Americanized. My mother’s family was also non-traditional. Only when I was 10 or even older they sent me to Sunday school and there I learned a bit about Jewish customs”.

When she is asked to say something in Hebrew she utters the only two words she remembers from that period: Shalom Aleichem.

The teenager, Janet Rosenberg, was “as beautiful as a filmstar, wise and popular”, so says her cousin, Judy Flanders, today working as a journalist on the Washington Post. She had so many suitors. She loved chemistry and biology and as a hobby she adopted politics, art and flying. “She had an aeroplane made of wood that she built herself and I always loved playing with it”, writes the cousin. Janet dreamed of becoming a pilot, she saved money from her summer work and with it paid for flying lessons. The money came to an end before she obtained a licence. “My parents did not have money to spare and thus ended my dream to fly”, she says and she admits that she is still attracted to aeroplanes. Since her young days Rosenberg took to fighting for liberal causes, something quite unpopular in the USA at the time. She was drawn towards socialist ideas and equality and joined the Left even before the McCarthy era in which Liberals were accused of being communist traitors.

“At University I had different friends - one was black and he was accepted only because he was a brilliant football player, and one was Chinese. As a rule, I had an inclination to join the underdogs”. She reflects, “At University I became very active in left-wing organisations and I took an active part in all demonstrations and protest marches. The feeling of persecution and deprivation I know from first hand experience: my father had to change his name. He was an engineer of heating systems and could not find employment. We moved to Detroit and again he was not employed. When the family moved to California he changed his name from Rosenberg to Roberts and all of a sudden his business flourished. They simply did not like Jews.

During World War II, Rosenberg reverted to the name that her father had rejected and registered at a nursing college. There she met Chadi Jagan, the son of an Indian family from Guyana, working on a sugar plantation. He studied dentistry and it was love at first sight.

“After 8 months of friendship we were married and we moved to Guyana” says the President. Chadi and Janet Jagan have built their lives in Georgetown. In the begging Chadi worked as a dentist and she as his assistant. Shortly afterwards they began their political activity and mobilised the workers on the sugar plantation creating a social movement and in 1950 they established the PPP, the Progressive Popular Movement, a socialist Marxist party which gained the support of the Indian majority in the country.
I entered politics not only because of my husband” said the President. I was the Secretary of the Party - years. I was the first woman to be elected to parliament; I was active in women’s organisations; twice I was a minister. I was the first woman on the local council. I am not like the wife of other Presidents in this part of the world who gain their positions because of their husbands. I did it by myself. At that time Guyana was still a British colony and in London they did not like the idea that a pro-communist party should rule. The British Governor oppressed the activists and in 1953, half a year after his winning the elections, he cancelled the results with the excuse that Guyana was threatened by a communist regime.”

The Jagan couple were sent to prison where they spent 5 months. At the elections in 1957 the party won and the same happened again in 1961 but the British decided to change the election procedure so that the political party of Porbas Bornum, the black leader, gained power.

They caused an upheaval among the sugar plantation workers and encouraged racial tension between Indians and blacks. You know how the CIA works....”

During the riots which followed, 176 people were killed. Rumours spread that President Rosenberg was a relative of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the communist Jewish couple who were executed for espionage for the USSR. The Americans and the British succeeded in their efforts. Bornum, the black leader, was elected as President and rejected the pre-........... ideas of Jagan and installed a new economic programme. In 1966 Guyana was declared as an independent state within the British Commonwealth. Bornum who ruled the country for 20 years created a totalitarian regime and crushed the country’s economy. He died in 1985.

The years passed for the Jagan couple in opposition. Janet lost her American citizenship. The US authorities refused to give her a visa and she was considered a persona non gratis in her own homeland. They refused to allow her to visit the US, even when her father was diagnosed as having cancer. He died without being able to see her again. She said “They were afraid that we would .................. but this was just paranoia”. As a matter of fact, Janet lost her US citizenship twice: Just after she had voted in the election in Guyana in 1953 and then her citizenship was withdrawn immediately but in 1965 the High Court ordered that one was not permitted to withdraw American citizenship from someone who voted in the elections in Israel. “Because of that Israeli”, says Jagan, “they returned my passport to me and then when I received my Guyanian citizenship in 1967, I was again informed that my American citizenship had been withdrawn”.
הסבהא יהודית
מאמריה, ישיאת יאנבל

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ישיאת יאנבל

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