

# Jagans' love cemented by trials

by Sanka Price

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT, it's said, does not last. Particularly when the two people are from different races, have totally distinct cultures, and meet at a time of war.

But it was in this setting that a pretty 22-year-old American nurse fell in love and married a Guyanese born dentist of East Indian extract, just nine months after meeting him. And today, 49 years later, that love affair, ignited by such contrasts, still burns brightly.

This is the story of Jewish born Janet Rosenberg and her life with husband Dr. Cheddi Jagan. It focuses on her struggle against prejudice, her stormy political career, imprisonment, the revoking of her American citizenship twice, and their love affair.

"We met at a party. He was a very, very handsome man. Very charming," Janet said with a girlish giggle. Then, smiling, admitted he swept her off her feet. Janet and Cheddi met in her Chicago hometown in January 1943, and by August 5, were man and wife.

"Neither family approved and my family was very upset. They were very much against it," the still attractive 72-year-old said. She added, "I took a conscious decision when I married him that I would go to his home, and I went."

Though Cheddi's family accepted Janet after they met her, those early years were difficult.

"It wasn't so easy for me because food was always a problem. I used to have dreams at night about walking through supermarkets because there wasn't any food here at all. It was dreadful. The food situation was bad, I used to be hungry most of the time.

## 'Bumped into racism'

"What was nice is that I got along very well with his family, and the father was a very nice man."

In those early years they took in members of Cheddi's rural based family and sent them to school in Georgetown, then overseas for further training. This led to a number of his brothers being trained — one as a dentist, one as a doctor and one as a lawyer, while his sisters studied nursing.

Relating one of the problems she encountered then, Janet said after being given approval by the headmistress to enroll Cheddi's eldest sister at Bishop's High School — the best girls' school at the time — the woman suddenly had no vacancy when she saw the child was not white like her.

"She had to go to another school. This was the first time I bumped into racism", Janet said.

In those years she utilised her nursing skills in Cheddi's surgery as a dental assistant. But by then her life's work was beginning to take shape.

Cheddi was becoming increasingly involved with agitating for the welfare of sugar workers, and she was by his side in this fight. In 1946, Janet got together with a number of progressive women to form the Women's Political and Economic Organisation. This group examined issues on housing, health, welfare and the other needs of women. They also campaigned for women's right to vote.

In that year too, the Political Affairs Committee (PAC) was founded with the specific purpose of laying the foundation for the formation of a political party. It was from this association she got into journalism as she had to prepare the PAC's bulletin. Though she was "shoved" into journalism, it is today the profession that gives her the greatest satisfaction.

A year later, and just four years after coming to British Guiana as it was then, Janet ran in her first election, and lost.

"That's where the bogey of Communism came in. The man who beat me and brought up this thing about Communism was a Portuguese. I can't remember race. The issue was strictly ideological and the Catholic Church utilising the whole machinery to see that I didn't get in."

Cheddi also contested those 1947 elections as an independent. He won. She said his stature and reputation grew when he was elected to the Legislative Council because of his strong labour stance.

"His reputation as an honest man started then, because in those days the big people used to buy out anyone with a big mouth, but they couldn't influence Cheddi," she proudly boasted.

The People's Progressive Party (PPP) was born in 1950 with her as general secretary, the late Forbes Burnham as chairman and Cheddi as leader. She became the PPP's first successful candidate ever in elections when it contested the municipal polls that year. Burnham and Cheddi lost. That victory also assured Janet of her place



FIRST LADY JANET JAGAN made Guyana history as the first woman to win a seat in municipal elections. At 72, she is the Editor-in-Chief of the weekly Mirror newspaper.

in Guyana's electoral history as the first woman ever to be elected in such a poll.

## No longer an American

It was after this election that she first had her American citizenship revoked. She said that in 1947 the Consulate called her in and asked her if she had voted (she was a candidate). When she said "yes", they told her she had lost her American citizenship — not for being a candidate, but for the act of voting.

Janet said prior to Guyana's independence in 1966, she was again called in by the United States consulate and her citizenship restored. This followed a ruling by the Supreme Court on a similar case which disallowed the revoking of citizenship because the person voted in elections in another country.

Within weeks however, she again lost the right to be a citizen in the country of her birth, because she had applied for Guyanese citizenship. Given these incidents and the fact that the United States played an integral role in ensuring the removal of her husband's government from power some years later, one wondered if she felt any bitterness towards the United States.

She says: "Not America *per se*, but I certainly had no good feelings for the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). They came and intervened. They played a dreadful role in this country, and I felt very strongly about what the CIA did. They fomented all of the problems."

She said hers was not a wild accusation, as the truth had been revealed over the years on the CIA's role in helping to finance the protracted civil servants' strike which helped to destabilise her husband's government.

In 1953, and by this time a mother, Janet won a seat in the National Assembly and became deputy speaker — the first woman to hold that position in Guyana. In that election, two other women were also elected, making them the first women to win seats in parliament.

Thumbing through a weather-worn booklet of the period, she smiled with delight at the faded picture of the three of them entering Parliament, each dressed in the trendy "shark skin" materials of the period with matching red hats, scarfs, purses and shoes.

That election took place against the background of the turbulent Cold War period and the witch hunt in the United States against people who expressed views that could be remotely termed as Communist.

From this period her life became a struggle to defend her beliefs and vision of helping the poorer classes in Guyana.

## Time in prison

After the PPP's victory that year the constitution was suspended. The party decided on an action of non-cooperation to force the British government's hand. This action

led to restrictions being placed on them and later they were both jailed for six months. Cheddi for leaving Georgetown, and Janet for possession of subversive literature (socialist books).

Relating her experience in prison, Janet said: "I was stuck in a cell. All you had was these folding canvas cots. The only thing that was difficult for me was the mosquitoes and rats, cockroaches and that type of thing. And the food was very bad of course.

"At several stages they isolated me as they didn't want me to talk to anyone."

From the Georgetown jail she was sent across the Berbice River, some 70 miles away, to a woman's prison in New Amsterdam. There she was allowed to do handicrafts and taught an illiterate inmate to read and write.

She recalls: "We did not dislike prison, in the sense that you had a lot of time to think. It was very quiet because in that period every minute we were busy. It was like a holiday".

After their period of incarceration, the Jagans resumed their work and won the 1957 and 1961 general elections. Cheddi became premier in 1961 with international self government, and Janet, always by his side, rose to minister of health, housing and labour.

In 1964 she was minister of home affairs when the British government passed a special Order-in-Council dismissing Cheddi's government and inviting his former colleague Burnham to form a coalition government.

Since then the two have kept the PPP alive, fighting the four general elections and the constitutional referendum held. They had consistently accused the government of rigging every election since 1964, and with the end of the Cold War, and international interests in seeing elections were free and fair, they both anticipated victory.

## 'Two lovely children'

But what of her marriage and relationship with their children, both of whom live in North America. Certainly such a turbulent life would take its toll, and surely she must have some regrets.

"No. That never entered my mind.

"We have two lovely children. We got a lot of satisfaction out of our children and we now have five grandchildren, and they love us very much, particularly Cheddi.

"Our life together has been highly political of course, almost every minute of it but we never aspired to any high living style. We're approximately middle income and in fact one of my regrets is that we did not really have enough money to support our son through dental school. He had to work his way through. "We live a modest life. Neither of us drink, well I used to smoke. Pretty ordinary life," she said modestly.

"I am concerned now because of so many threats of assassination against Cheddi. I know of several things that could happen, but fortunately they haven't happened. His children are always calling up, they are worried to death because so many people don't want him to get where he is going," Janet said.

Some people would say that their good fortune so far was due to the Grace of God, but as they are atheists, I asked to what would she attribute their longevity and fortitude?

"We just don't bother with religion. Religion has never played an important role in our lives. I wouldn't say we are against religion, it's just we are not interested, and I raised my children like that — take what you want, see everything and that is it."

## A second honeymoon?

Recalling her fondest memory with Cheddi she said it was back in 1950 when she visited Haiti and went up to the famous citadel of Henri Christophe. Looking away, as if she were picturing the setting in her mind, she quietly smiled and said it was romantic.

"It was something beautiful. We enjoyed our company. It was after my son was born."

Was it a second honeymoon?

With a shy smile, she quietly answered, "Maybe".

So what is the future for this grand lady who, with her husband, has dominated headlines in the Caribbean for 49 years.

For her, a quiet golden anniversary on August 5 1993, and wisdom enough to realise when she can't cut it anymore.

"I hope to be intelligent enough to retire before I'm a nuisance to anyone. As you get older you can become a nuisance or be in the way, or block the road for other people. I hope I have that sense."