

# Guyana's Political Bubbe

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Voters in Guyana are asking over and over again who Janet Rosenberg Jagan will support in their presidential election early next year.

An 85-year-old Jewish grandmother born and raised in Chicago, Jagan is an unlikely power broker in this remote, Idaho-sized country of 740,000 people on the northern rim of South America.

The Guyanese people elected Jagan president in late 1997 shortly after the death of her husband, President Cheddi Jagan, a lifelong Marxist. She resigned the presidency after almost two years in office after she suffered a heart attack.

Despite her worsening diabetes, she's up and around these days, attending to business at her office in central Georgetown, the county's capital.

"My allegiance is to my party," Jagan said. "It will decide who its candidate is when the election date is fixed."

Jagan and her husband founded the People's Progressive Party on Jan. 1, 1950, when Guyana was still a British colony known as British Guiana. Her office is located on the second floor of the PPP headquarters, in a wooden building called Freedom House, in the seaport city of 150,000.

Jagan doesn't offer a straight answer to the question of whom she'll support because it looks like her son, Cheddi Jr., also known as "Joey," will run for president. That would pit him against President Bharrat Jagdeo, 41, who was Jagan's finance minister.

Jagdeo took over when Jagan retired and was re-elected to a five-year presidential term in March 2001.

The chances of Janet Rosenberg heading a Third World nation were about a zillion to one in 1920, the year she was born at Michael Reese Hospital on Chicago's South Side.

Her father, Charles Rosenberg, was a plumbing and heating salesman. Both anti-Semitism and the Great Depression took their toll on him, Jagan says.

"Business was awful. My father couldn't make a good living," she recalled. But he did her an important favor.

"He took me to the public library once a week. He got me reading a lot," she recalls fondly.

The family moved to Detroit for a time during the Depression, enabling her to go to Detroit University, Wayne State and Michigan State, and in 1942 she was a nursing student at Chicago's Cook County Hospital. One night at a party she met a dental student from Northwestern University, a young man from then-British Guiana named Cheddi Jagan.

The pair fell in love and married, despite opposition from both sets of parents. In 1943 her husband returned to

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British Guiana to set up his dental practice; Jagan stayed in Chicago a bit longer, earning money as a proofreader for the American Medical Association and joining him in late December of that year.

They quickly became involved in politics. Plantation workers "always called on Cheddi" when they had problems, Jagan recalls, and soon she and her husband found themselves involved in the trade union movement.

By 1947, workers came to Jagan's husband and urged him to run for Parliament. He ran and won, while Jagan lost in another district. The couple helped sugar workers and bauxite workers in long strikes and, after founding the PPP, Jagan edited the party's newspaper and became the first woman elected to the Georgetown City Council, in 1950.

In 1953, the British introduced limited self-government to Guyana and the PPP won. Jagan was elected to Parliament and her husband became chief minister.

The British "kicked us out after four and a half months," she says. "The Constitution was suspended and British Marines were brought in."

Jagan's husband, who was of East Indian heritage, felt the heavy restrictions slapped on by the British rulers in early 1954: He was jailed for six months for traveling out of town.

The day he was released, Jagan herself was imprisoned "for attending a Hindu thing called a yag, and I had a copy of Nehru's book. The British called it a political meeting," she recalls.

Jagan spent almost six months in jail, though that didn't shake her convictions.

"Cheddi and I always have believed in socialism. To us that meant getting rid of oppression so the poor man can get out of his poverty and enjoy the fruits of the country," she said.

Jagan doesn't keep kosher and isn't observant at all, though she proudly displays a silver menorah in her home -- given to her in 1962 by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, when both were activists in the international socialist movement.

Surprisingly, Guyana -- South America's only English-speaking country -- also is the only country on the continent without a synagogue or Jewish community. In fact, Jagan is believed to be one of only 10 or so Jews in all of Guyana.

She's also one of the few white people in a country dominated by racial issues. About 48 percent of Guyana's population is of East Indian descent. Another 36 percent are Afro-Guyanese, descendants of slaves brought over by the Dutch before the British takeover. About 7 percent are American Indian; the rest are Portuguese, Chinese or mixed race.

In 1992, a quarter-century after Guyana achieved independence, Jagan's husband won a free and fair election as president, and Jagan was named Guyana's ambassador to the United Nations. When her husband died five years later, she became president -- making her the first white president of Guyana, the first elected female president in South America and the first Jewish head of state in South American history.

Jagan believes there has been "lots of improvement" in Guyana in the last decade, though she notes that "heavy migration" tends to hurt the country: Educated Guyanese go to Canada, the United States and the Caribbean's English-speaking islands in search of better jobs.

Still, she notes with pride that Guyanese are "99 percent literate."

Jagan is especially proud of one of her husband's programs under which the government has provided about 60,000 housing lots for the poor at \$300 to \$400 each. She says that "education has improved tremendously" in recent years, the infant mortality rate has dropped and the country's water supply is much safer.

Jagan stays in touch with her brother, James Rosenberg, 87, a retiree living in the Chicago suburb of Arlington Heights.

She clearly misses her husband, and her voice takes on a note of sadness when she recommends going to the Red House on Georgetown's High Street to study his papers and mementos. That institution, known as the

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Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, is financed by an organization run by their daughter, Nadira, 50, a jeweler in Toronto.

Meanwhile, her son Joey, 56, also a dentist, is starting his own political movement, the Unity Party. If the party takes off, Guyana could once again have a Jewish president according to halachah, or Jewish law, though his mother declined to speculate on her son's chances of winning the next election.

"My son and I don't discuss these things at all," Jagan said with a smile.

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