

The Jewish Grandmother from America, the President of Guyana

By Udi Segal/Guyana

The title "Lady President" is the kind of expression that always sounds strange to those who were bred in a men dominated society, i. e. everywhere on the planet. Toward the end of the second millennium western culture cannot always enjoy the fruits of the feminist revolution. Major roles have unfortunately remained largely in men's hands. However, here and there there are exceptions, and I am on my way to one of them, driving on bad roads, leading from the only and lonesome airport of Georgetown, capital of Guyana, the only South-American state where English is the formal language - to the city itself. From the window of the speeding cab poor villages can be seen on the background of a tropical jungle, covering most of the country. During the drive I look at the people of Guyana. 53% are Indians, descendants of sugar workers brought here by the Englishmen. 35% are blacks, descendants of slaves who have been transferred among the English colonies. And they have a president. Her name is Janet Rosenberg, she is 77 years old, and in December 97 she was re-elected as president of Guyana, a country that lies on the Atlantic shore in South-America. A state of jungles, the size of Britain, however some 80 % of it covered by forests.

Janet Rosenberg "Lady President" is a Jewish grandmother, white American from Chicago, ruling Guyana although only few if any Jews. Americans or whites live there. Her hair is snow white and usually she wears short flower-drawn dresses, which make heat and humidity more bearable.

"My family has not been religious, but I have never denied my Jewish descent", says the president in a special interview for **Maariv**. "There are no Jews here save for me. In the past there were few in the diamonds business, and there was one in Surinam and perhaps several others in Barbados in the 19th century, but here there are no Jews. During all the years I have been living here I was the only Jew in the country". Although she does not conceal her descent, the relations that she maintains with Israel are pretty weak. No, Guyana will not be another Micronesia, and Netanyahu, well, she is not crazy about him too.

The population of this country is very small - only 700 thousand citizens, 200,000 living in Georgetown the capital. Most of the houses in town are built from wood, have one story and protected from floods. There are not many high buildings, but if you try hard enough you can find a traffic jam here and there. However, since economists report some recovery in the last two years it is possible to find more cars on the roads, most of them old ones or cheap Japanese.

The gate of the presidential palace reminds us of the big gate of Zrifin (Israeli military camp). A negligent security check awaited us beyond it, and in few minutes we were inside, walking among the wooden houses on a pavement which many of its stones are broken.

The president accepts the guests warmly and hears the first question: How did a Jewish girl, a white person from Chicago, become the president of the republic in this jungle region?

"I don't know" she says, "maybe I came here because I was an American Jew, and in the thirties and forties it has not been easy. The prejudice and antisemite American society had made living there difficult. As a child I remember that when my parents had been planning a vacation, too many places had been out of the question because entrance to 'Jews and dogs' had been forbidden. This, perhaps, is what made me become a fighter for human rights, and choose the political road that has led me hitherto.

Janet Rosenberg was born in 1920 in Chicago, to Jewish parents, born in the United States. "My parents were very much American, very much secular. Perhaps because we lived in an area with few Jews only, and my father's family has been three generations in the States, so they were completely American. My mother's family was also not a traditional family. When I was ten years old I was sent to a 'Sunday school' where I learned a little on Jewish tradition". When I ask to hear something in Hebrew, she can only say "Shalom Aleichem".

'Janet Rosenberg was beautiful as a movie star, clever and popular', says her cousin Judi Flender, a journalist in the "Washington Post". "She had many friends, she loved chemistry and biology, and as a hobby she went into politics, arts and flight. She had a wooden airplane we loved playing with".

Janet dreamed on becoming a pilot. She saved money working in holidays and took some lessons, however there was not enough money to accomplish the course. "My parents couldn't give me money so this was the end of my dream to fly". She is willing to say she still has weak point for airplanes.

Already in her youth she came close to the ideas of libertarianism which were not very popular then in the United States. She was attracted to the ideology of socialism and equality. She had found herself within the left before Mccarthyism started hunting left wing people accusing them of communism and treason. "In the university I had many friends. One was black, who was accepted only because he had been a football player. Another one was chinese. In general, I was inclined to make friends with the 'underdogs'. In the university I became very active in leftist organizations and a partner in all protests

and demonstrations.” She is very familiar with the feeling of discrimination. “My father had to change his name. He was an engineer of heating systems and could not find a job. We moved to Detroit, and still he did not find a job. When the family was moving to California he changed his name from Rosenberg to Roberts, and only then did his business start to prosper. Jews were not likable”.

In the Second World War Rosenberg, who later retook her forsaken name, joined the military effort and started studying nursing. In school she met a man of an Indian workers’ family who used to work in the sugar cane plantations of Guyana. He was studying dentistry then and it was love of first sight. “After eight months we got married and went to Guyana”, tells the president.

She and her husband have made their home in Georgetown. In the beginning he used to work as a dentist, with her as his assistant. However, after a while they had become involved in political activities, recruiting workers of the sugar plantations, forming a social movement and in 1950 establishing the People’s Progressive Party (PPP), a socialist-Marxist party which has won the support of the Indian majority in the country.

“I became a politician not only because of my husband... I had been the Party’s secretary for 20 years; the first woman to be elected to the parliament; I was active in women’s organizations; I was twice a minister and first woman in the city council. I am not like other presidents’ wives in this part of the world. I made myself.”

At that time Guyana was still a British colony, and the idea that a pro-communist party is in power was not liked. The British governor oppressed the activists of the People’s party and in 1953, six months after the victory in the elections, he called off the results, claiming that Guyana was about to be taken over by communists. Janet and her husband were arrested and sent to prison for 5 months. However, in the elections of 1957 and 1961 the party won the elections again, but the British together with the CIA changed the method of elections which brought to power the party of Forbes Burnum. “It was all a fraud”, she says today. “you know how the CIA works”. In the riots then 176 people were killed, and rumours were spread allegedly telling about Janet that she is a relative of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The British-American conspiracy has succeeded, and Burnum ruled for 20 years destroying the country’s economy. He died in 1985. Janet and her husband were active in the opposition. Twice did she lose the American citizenship, and was considered to be a persona non grata in her homeland. In 1992, after 28 years in the political desert her husband has won the first free elections in Guyana, however after four years of economic reforms trying to relieve some of the problems of poverty, he died of heart attack. Janet was urged by the party to run for presidency and she won the elections.

She is kind, smiling, generous, very modest and very informal. ... We were asking her about her relations to Israel. “Nothing special, save for the fact that this is a place where the Jews of the world can live in. I think you have done a great job and turned Israel into a wealthy country.

We asked her, what does she think about prime minister Netanyahu. “I know just a little about him from T.V.. He seems to me a little alienated from the the Israeli public. But may be it’s unfair...”

• The inter-racial tension in Guyana is not such a big problem, she says. It is a secular state, and no one has a problem with the fact that I am Jewish.

You are 77 years old, writing children’s literature, you are a sculptor, and you have had a very rich political life. Why do you need this?

“Truly, I don’t. When my husband died, they came to me from the party and said that only I can win and that they needed me. I preferred working as a journalist for the ‘Mirror’, but the party called, so I came.”