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Guyana/Interview - The Struggle for Independence, Women's Rights and Democracy

### "I DO NOT FORGET MY ROOTS"

Janet Resenberg and Ruth Dreifuss have something in common: the former also became the first woman not to say the first woman of Jewish origin, to be elected President of her Country, the South American State of Guyana one year ago. Janet too was a trade unionist first, rising to Minister of Health and later Minister for Home Affairs, JR interviews President Jagan.

Ruth Dreifuss is not the only Jewish Head of State outside Israel, Janet Rosenberg (77), born in Chicago in the USA, has been the President of Guyana, a former British colony located in the North Eastern part of South America.

Janet Jagan answered in writing the questions JR faxed to her through her Protocol Department. She finds it interesting to note that Switzerland's Head of State is also a woman of Jewish origins, but does not consider her self as a Jewish Head of State. 'I have spent most of my lifetime fighting a political battle for Independence, Woman's rights and the Restoration of Democracy, but this did not have anything to do with my Jewish roots'. The President added that her parents were not very religious so that she grew up with little exposure to - and experience of the Jewish world. Later on as well did she have little contacts with Jews as there is no Jewish Community in Guyana. She does not really have any ties with Israel but stresses however that she does not all deny her origins which she very much respects.

### **Deprivation of Civil Rights**

Janet Rosenberg was a nurse when she met Cheddi Jagan in 1942, who, like most of his fellow-Guyanese compatriots of Indian origin, was studying medicine in Chicago. They wed one year later she followed him to his country. 'At the beginning, she says, my family was very worried but everything fell into place later on'. Janet Jagan has five grand children from her two children whom, in her own words 'she loves dearly'. None of the younger members of the Jagan family stepped in their parent's footsteps to play an active role on the political scene. First, Janet worked as a dental assistant in her husband's clinic for ten years but participated with him in Guyana's struggle for independence, which became a reality in 1966. She continued on the same course later fighting for democratic structures and free elections; she was a parliamentarian for 44 years until she became President.

Cheddi Jagan, died of a heart attack in 1997 while President in office. He was considered as the supreme national hero in his country, who spent many years of his life in prison. Janet's freedom of movement was restricted by the British for half a year in 1955, and she was forced to report to the police headquarters in Georgetown, Guyana's capital, every week. She was stripped of her American citizenship as the USA suspected then that Guyana could become a second Cuba, a second base for the Soviet Union in the western hemisphere. When asked if she wanted her American citizenship back later on, Janet turned the offer down.

Her religion has never been an issue for the Guyanese People and certainly not when she was appointed Minister-President after her husband's death and nominated by her Party as official candidate for the presidential elections six months later. At the end of the day, what mattered most for the multi-religious Guyanese population is that she and her husband Cheddi suffered for their country and rebelled against England and the USA. The only concern of population of this small state is the health of 'Her Excellency', as she is referred to, as their hearts forever bear the blueprint of her perilous political life. Shortly after her arrival in Guyana, Janet joined the first union in the country. In 1946, she founded a political and economic women's organization, the WPO, and became the editor of the Bulletin of the political Community she set up. She made the workers' struggle her cause. The Jagan's founded the 'People's Progressive Party or PPP' in 1950.

Janet became the PPP's first Secretary General and held the highest position within the party for twenty years. She is still the Chairwoman of the PPP's Women's Organisation which she founded in 1953, when voting - and election rights were conferred to Guyanese women. She was among the three first women parliamentarians and became Vice-President later on. The British colonial power abrogated the Guyanese Constitution and Janet was thrown in prison. She was elected at the parliamentary elections of 1957, and later became Minister of Labour, Health and Public Works. She changed portfolios in 1963 and became Minister for Home Affairs. She stepped down however one year later, in protest against the political developments at that time, and embarked on a new struggle against the rigging of elections. The pugnacious politician became Chief Editor of the newspaper the 'Mirror'. She also re-organized the journalists' union of Guyana, which she led until 1997. She did not resign from The Mirror when her husband won the first free elections in post-colonial Guyana and became President in 1992, and she, the First Lady. She wrote several political books and two political story books for children 'When Grand Dad Cheddi was a young boy' and 'Children stories from Guyana's Struggle for Freedom'.

She represented her country at the UN for three months in 1993 as the Guyanese Ambassador to the UN had been elected President of the Parliament. She also held other positions while performing her official duties in areas ranging from arts,

to children's rights etc.

After her husband's death, Janet Jagan was elected Minister-President, Vice-President later on, and President since December 19, 1997.

Which advise would she give Ruth Dreifuss after one year in office? 'She should be prepared to work hard and for long hours every day'. Personal exchange of views are not really necessary her senior colleague says. 'Both of us have too much to do, to see each other regularly. Janet Jagan has only visited Switzerland once until now. What is the main difference between Guyana and Switzerland? The former is a member of the UN, the latter is not; the common denominator between the two countries however is that both of them are quite small. Guyana though is only small in respect of its huge neighbouring countries, as she is five times the size of Switzerland, stretching from the Atlantic ocean and mountains, North east of South America. Guyana's territory covers 231,744 square metres, but 65% of which consist of forests between Venezuela and Brazil in the South, and an area half the size of Suriname in the East. This explains why the country has not yet one million inhabitants; its population consists of many Indians and descendants of former black slaves. Cane sugar plantations are Guyana's wealth not to mention minerals like bauxite, manganese, gold and diamonds.

### **Successful Struggle for Woman's Rights**

Janet Jagan is also very proud that Guyanese women have been conferred direct and indirect voting rights since 1953 that is to say 18 years before the Swiss women. 'Our struggle for Women's rights in Guyana was obviously more successful than in Switzerland' she notes. She is also fully aware and approves the current debates taking place in Switzerland and in other countries on the Unfairness of the Past, but feels however that 'the issue of the unfairness of the past should not only be finalized by now but that case should be closed once and for all. This applies to the abominations which took place during World War II in particular'. Janet Rosenberg Jagan makes pugnacious proposals for the world, a world where she and her colleague Ruth Dreifuss serve as Presidents, and for the next millennium. I believe that we need to have a new global order to be able to fight war, poverty and disease. My husband, Cheddi Jagan, was very strongly in favour of that policy'.