

The Jewish Roots of Former President of Guyana Janet (Rosenberg) Jagan
The first American-born woman to lead a nation By Suzanne Wasserman

Janet Rosenberg was born on the South Side of Chicago on October 20, 1920. Her parents were Charles and Kate Rosenberg (nee Kronberg.)

My mother, Eileen Wasserman (nee Kronberg) and Janet are first cousins. My mother is nine years younger. Janet's maternal grandparents, Adolph and Rosa Kronberg (nee Appelbaum,) were Jewish immigrants. Adolph immigrated to Chicago from Romania and Rosa came from Hungary. One story goes that they met on the ship coming over from Europe. It is more likely that they met in Chicago. Rosa was born with a clubbed foot and her family thought because of that she would never marry. They had her learn a craft and apparently she was an able seamstress. She was also an excellent cook. Adolph was from an Orthodox Jewish family in Romania but he rejected religion and lived as a freethinker. He worked as a watchmaker and jeweler. He loved to play cards and had a great sense of humor.

Adolph and Rosa Kronberg had four children--Mary, Kate, Laura and Leo. Kate was Janet's mother; Leo was my grandfather. My mother tells the story about how the family used to tease Kate because she was the only child with blond hair and blue eyes. They used to tell her she was adopted. The other children were all dark haired. My grandfather had jet-black hair and dark eyes. His three older sisters adored him but also bossed him around; he was very spoiled. They lived in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood, which was unusual for a Jewish family at the time.

Janet told me she has vivid memories of her grandparents, my great grandparents. As a girl, she lived about four blocks away from her grandparents. Her grandparents lived in a one-bedroom apartment with their youngest daughter Laura (my great aunt), their son Leo (my grandfather), his wife Faye (my grandmother) and their granddaughter, Eileen (my mother.) Janet remembered that Adolph was a "great man. He was very modern, not old-fashioned. Your great grandmother, Rosa," Janet told me, "was very old-fashioned. She stayed in the house while Adolph was all over making friends and having a good time." "In fact," she remembered, "After your great grandmother died, I asked him to come and live with me in Guyana. But the family wouldn't allow it." Apparently, he wanted to go but he was in his 90s at the time and the family felt he was too old to make the transition.

Kate, Janet's mother (and my great aunt) was a wonderful person. I remember her as someone who took care of everyone. She was a terrific seamstress. My mother tells stories about how when Kate was young, she and her sister Mary would go downtown in Chicago to look at mannequins in the window of Marshall Field's Department Store on State Street. Mary would sketch the clothes and when they returned home, Kate would whip up the exact same designs. One of my favorite pictures of Janet shows her in a dress that her mother made for her. When my twin sister and I were born, Kate came to help my mother even though by that time she was living in California. She was a very good cook. She taught my sisters and me how to make chocolate chips cookies.

Janet was always close with her older brother Jim. She says he was always helpful and supportive of her. Janet was a very adventurous young woman. In Chicago, she loved to do anything athletic including swimming, speed skating and horseback riding. She trained for the Olympics in back stroke. She was also studious and her father Charlie always encouraged her in her studies. "From my father I learned about books," Janet recalls, "He took me to the public library and let me loose. I used to accompany him there every week. He used to read two books a week.

I've always loved books." Charlie was self- educated, having finished only one year of high school. He was also a strict father and my mother remembers being afraid of him. Charlie was very conservative politically, which was somewhat unusual for the times. My mother remembers that her and Janet's grandfather Adolph and Charlie used to argue about politics all the time.

Janet was a very beautiful young woman and had a lot of adulation from young men. But that adulation was never really important to her. She never focused on her physical appearance.

The Depression hit the Rosenbergs hard. Charlie lost his sheet metal business and was out of work for almost three years. Kate had to take in sewing at home to help the family survive. Eventually they decided to move to Detroit to see if things were better there. While in Detroit, Janet enrolled at Wayne State University. It was in Detroit during the 1930s that she got involved in progressive politics.

She also took up an unusual hobby for a young woman in the 1930s. Her brother Jim remembers that she was always broke at school and her parents were worried that she had developed some bad habits. It turns out she was spending her allowance on flying lessons. "She soloed before my father let her take the car out," her brother Jim remembered. "When my parents found out I was spending my allowance on flying lessons, they were very angry," Janet recalled.

When World War II broke out, Janet decided she wanted to help the war effort so she enrolled in a nursing program at Cook County Nursing School in Chicago. Janet was an incredibly accomplished and beautiful young woman but she cared about social justice and politics more than anything else.

It was in Chicago in 1942 that she met Cheddi Jagan at a party of a mutual friend. They fell immediately in love. Janet's parents were very upset. When Janet told her parents she was going to marry Cheddi, her father threatened to shoot him on sight and my great grandmother Rosa had a stroke! ("This was not true"- JJ)But Janet and Cheddi were determined. She and Cheddi were married at City Hall in Chicago in August of 1943. Janet and her parents eventually reconciled. When Janet informed her parents that they were going to live in British Guiana, Janet's father was convinced that Janet would return in a year. Although her mother came to visit her in Guyana, her father never did. Janet regrets that Cheddi and her father never had a chance to meet. Her father passed away in 1957. Janet wrote her mother every single week for over forty years! Janet has been in Guyana for 61 years!