
Hyde Park native documents unique life of political radical

by Lenore T. Adkins

There is a secret on Chicago's Mid-South Side. This part of the city, long known as a haven for political independents, reared Janet Rosenberg-Jagan, a Communist who also happens to be the first American-born woman to rule a foreign country.

The little-known story of South Shore-born Rosenberg-Jagan, who was president of Guyana, South America from 1997 to 1999, is woven into a new documentary opening this week at the Gene Siskel Film Center. *Thunder in Guyana* is directed by Suzanne Wasserman, a Hyde Park resident who is Rosenberg-Jagan's second cousin and a 1975 alumna of Kenwood Academy.

Now 83, Rosenberg-Jagan still lives in

Guyana. But her story began in Hyde Park.

In the early 1940s, Janet Rosenberg met Guyanese native Cheddi Jagan at International House, the University of Chicago residence on the Midway that houses many foreign students. She married Jagan in 1943, and they briefly lived in Hyde Park at 57th Street and Maryland Avenue. Ignoring her family's threats to disown her, she and her new husband moved to the small South American country of Guyana. There, they joined the growing fight for independence from Britain, which had colonized the country in 1831.

Hyde Park resident Eileen Wasserman, the mother of the film's director and Rosenberg's first cousin, remembers that Janet's behavior made the family "crazed."

"She's this Jewish girl, Janet

Rosenberg...and so [her parents] always said 'Don't go to International House because it's filled with Communists,'" recalled Wasserman. "Everybody was sort of crazed from it because he was considered black, which he isn't; he was Indian."

The 50-minute documentary begins with the couple's move to Guyana in 1943. The country was still under British rule, and would be for another 23 years. The film, which has won a Best Documentary award from the Boston Jewish Film Festival and Cine's Golden Eagle Award for best documentary, was made on a shoestring budget of \$150,000.

"That's really, really low for a documentary budget, especially one that's shot in a

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foreign country," said director Suzanne Wasserman, a historian raised in Hyde Park and now living in New York City.

Upon their arrival in Guyana, Janet and Cheddi founded the People's Progressive Party (PPP), a Marxist party that soon became the country's first modern political party.

According to Wasserman, Rosenberg-Jagan first became interested in communist politics while attending Michigan's Wayne State University. Her beliefs solidified over the years, and she and her husband parlayed their values into the PPP, a party that among other things, pushed for every adult's right to vote in the 1953 election. Until the 1953 election, only white males who owned property were allowed to cast votes.

It was the election of 1953 that seated Cheddi Jagan, head of the PPP, as the country's leader, and Rosenberg-Jagan as the country's first female minister and deputy speaker of parliament. Jagan's win made him the first Communist leader to head a country on the Western Hemisphere, predating Cuba's Fidel Castro by six years.

But their victory was short-lived.

Less than a year into their terms and during the height of the Red Scare, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ousted the couple from office. They were later imprisoned and placed under house arrest for being members of the Communist Party, a criminal offense.

"The British got nervous because they thought Cheddi was too radical, so Winston Churchill called in troops and disbanded the election," Suzanne Wasserman explained. "He kicked Cheddi out of office even though he was democratically elected."

Undaunted, Jagan again ran for the nation's top office in 1957 and won. This time, the British stayed out of the way and let him govern.

But in 1961, according to Wasserman, the U.S. government got involved, when President John F. Kennedy sent the CIA to incite racial and social unrest. Jagan continued to win elections, but was unable to take the office. For the 1964 election, the British pushed proportional representation into law, which meant that even though Jagan's party continued to win the popular vote in every election, he still lost the election.

"Kind of like Gore and Bush again," Wasserman said. "They made sure that Cheddi wasn't going to win so that he couldn't retain the presidency and the British and the U.S. pushed through their candidate, a man named Forbes Burnham."

Burnham, a one-time member of Jagan's party, beat him in the next three elections in

the 60s and 70s until Burnham died in 1985. From there, Burnham's protégé Desmond Hoyt took over. Every election between 1968 and 1992 was fixed, according to Wasserman.

But in 1992, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and other organizations convinced the PNC to hold democratic elections and intervened to make sure the elections were fair

declared and the election commissioner decided to say that Janet had won, even though all the votes hadn't been counted," said Wasserman, who was there during the unrest. "So it was kind of like our election in 2000, although this was in 1997."

Rosenberg-Jagan was president for two years before stepping down due to her health. Her vice president took over and her party is still in power.

"I was really inspired to tell the story, because not only do I think it is an important story in world history, but also it's a family story and Janet's story is one that very few people know about and it's just so incredible," Wasserman said. "It's like so many other similar stories of things that happened in Iran and Guatemala and really all over the world with democratic leaders getting overthrown because they were either Socialists or Communists or they were too left wing for the West and unfortunately, what happened there set an awful precedent for what came throughout the second half of the 20th century."

The film will be shown



Janet Rosenberg-Jagan (center) celebrates after her husband, and the political party she founded with him, won the 1961 elections.



The Jagan family at home. From left, son Cheddi Jr., daughter Nadira, Cheddi Sr. and Janet.

and free. That year's election put Jagan into office as Guyana's president for the first time since the country won its independence in 1966. He stayed there until he died in 1997.

"So finally, and Janet and Cheddi and others were trying to work to get democracy reestablished and the only person who really came to their rescue was Jimmy Carter," Wasserman said.

After her husband died in office in 1997, Janet was elected president in the first election monitored by the Guyanese people. But the election's results took nearly a week to come in and after five days, people became restless.

"People started to riot and so once the rioting happened, a state of emergency was



Janet Rosenberg-Jagan and her husband Cheddi Jagan shortly after they wed in 1943.

Friday, Jan. 9 at 8 p.m. and Monday, Jan. 12 at the Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State St. For more information, call 312-575-8000.
