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Late Edition - Final

A Radical Journey From Chicago to Guyana

By VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

Wondering if you've lived up to your potential? Consider Janet Jagan. Named Janet Rosenberg when she was born in Chicago in 1920, she grew up in the suburbs. At Wayne State University in Detroit, she turned radical; she met a gallant Guyanese student, Cheddi Jagan, in 1942. Her parents objected (her father threatened to shoot him), but she married him anyway.

In 1943, the Jagans moved to what was then British Guiana, became involved in labor politics and formed a left-wing political party. Cheddi was elected chief minister in 1953. Then they had two children, were vilified as Communist, went to jail. Finally, after years in and out -- mostly out -- of power, Cheddi Jagan was elected president of free Guyana in 1992. When he died of a heart attack in 1997, Janet saw her calling: She ran for president of Guyana that year and was elected.

The filmmaker Suzanne Wasserman, an admiring relative (she's a daughter of Ms. Jagan's first cousin), tells this story in "**Thunder in Guyana**," a presentation of Independent Lens that appears tonight on PBS. A simple affair, the documentary uses voice-over, casual conversation, interviews and archival images to portray Ms. Jagan as fearless, forthright, principled, heroic. Though newspapers in the 1950's hinted that she was kin to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (she wasn't) and -- alternatively -- called her "the second Eva Peron," she is portrayed as a fair-minded progressive.

Ms. Wasserman is understandably most interested in how Ms. Jagan came to abandon her tribe, their tribe -- suburban Midwestern Jews -- to fight for another people altogether. Did she do it for love of Cheddi Jagan? One relative says so. Or was she driven by idealism, willfulness, defiance?

Now in her 80's and somewhat removed from her original motives, Ms. Jagan surmises that as a Jewish woman she might have developed sympathy for the downtrodden. But Ms. Jagan doesn't give the explanation too much weight. Nor does she spend much time complaining about her parents, despite their rejection of her husband. She remembers her mother's mah-jongg games with affection, and regrets having missed her father's funeral. She also wrote many conscientious letters home.

Certainly some of Ms. Jagan's willingness to take up the cause of the Guyanese must be explained in the universalist language of Communism. She appeared to believe, at least at first, that liberating Guyanese workers from slave wages was part of a larger world-historical trend, and she and her husband were openly Communist during much of their careers.

Though Ms. Wasserman shows clips of Cheddi Jagan facing a malevolent are-you-or-aren't-you interrogation on "Meet the Press," she does not ask Ms. Jagan to explain her ideology in the present day, and that's a shame. What did she make of the fall of the Soviet Union? What does she think of the example of Cuba? When, if ever, did she stop reading Marx, who had so excited her as an undergraduate? Does she think it's a joke now? Or dangerous? Does she think some of the old ideas can be saved?

Communism -- as theory, as explanation, as promise -- motivated so many Americans in the 20th century, and yet today the memory of it enrages the right and embarrasses the left. The rage and the embarrassment do a grave disservice to history. Marxist ideology did not define history the way believers thought it would, but its influence on people who changed their lives, and the lives of others in its name, is incalculable. There's nothing like it now, and we cannot comprehend the

lives of people like Janet Jagan without it.

'Independent Lens'

**Thunder in Guyana'**

PBS, tonight at 10; check local listings.

Suzanne Wasserman, director, producer and writer; Amanda Zinoman, editor and writer; Debra Granik, cinematography; Steve Sandberg, original score; Deborah Shaffer, executive producer.