

*Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back* Transcript

Author: Katya Cengel (KC)

In Conversation with: Maggie Bodemer (MB)

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Description: Transcript of a podcast of the discussion of the book, *Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back* between author Katya Cengel of journalism and Maggie Bodemer of social sciences and ethnic studies.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): Welcome, to Kennedy Library's Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on Friday, February 22, 2019 at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features journalist and lecturer, Katya Cengel, and Dr. Maggie Bodemer, talking about Katya's book, *Exiled: From the Killing Fields of Cambodia to California and Back*. Katya Cengel is an award winning journalist and freelance writer whose work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. She teaches in the Journalism department at Cal Poly, and is also author of another book from the University of Nebraska Press, *Bluegrass Baseball*. The book to be discussed today, *Exiled*, was published in 2018 and explores the experiences of Cambodian immigrants, some of whom after so many years, now face deportation. Katya's conversational partner today is Dr. Maggie Bodemer. Maggie regularly teaches courses on Modern Southeast Asia, Modern East Asia, and the Multicultural Origins of the United States. An anthropologist by training, she has previously taught in both the Social Sciences and Ethnic Studies departments, and prior to her arrival at Cal Poly, she conducted extensive Fulbright funded research in Vietnam.

[Applause]

KC: Thank you, thank you so much for having us here. I think with—I'll start with how I decided to write this book. It was actually back 2013 I believe, I was doing a story in Cambodia, about Cambodian Americans who had been deported to Cambodia and what happens is they're a legal permanent residents of the U.S., they came as refugees but they did not have citizenship so they were subject to deportation. And I went there to tell the story of, they're been some articles about this in the past but none about the women, it was all about the men, so I found some women and I focused on those women. And at the end of the story, it ran—I realized, there was so much more to this story and that was why I decided to do the book. Because I wanted to tell the generations that this didn't start with that generation that was facing deportation, it was deported but it started with their parents. And I think before I get into more about the book and everything because it's got all these nuances with laws and things that bog you down. I want to just read a short excerpt that kind of tells you about the people, because I follow four families, and it's their stories that are important more than what I can tell you so I want to read you a short excerpt. It's called "Chapter 4: the Murderer". "Long Beach, California,

August 2016. The agents showed up at Chanthaveth Ros's Long Beach home early in the morning. They had a picture of her eldest son, David Ros. Her son had coached her over, and over again, that she was never to let Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents into her home. 'Make them get a search warrant,' David told her, 'you don't have to let them in. You don't even have to open the door.' But she panicked when she saw the armed and uniformed ICE agents on her doorstep, and she did both things. She opened the door and she let them in. Chanthaveth Ros's first son is a former felon. Her second son is a pastor. It was her second son, Nathan, whom she had tried to abort. It was the mid 1970's, the Khmer Rouge were in power. She had four children already and didn't want to bring another child into the world only to watch it be beaten, starved, and tortured. She drank stuff and did stuff, but for some reason she remained pregnant. The baby, Nathan, lived. Many others in her family did not. Eight of her 16 siblings died during the genocide. If Chanthaveth had stayed in Phnom Penh, she believes she would have also died. But after getting married in 1967, she moved to Battambang with her husband." Battambang is another area of Cambodia, Phnom Penh's the capital. "They had five children together. Nathan was 6 months old when her husband disappeared. David always thought the Khmer Rouge took his father because he was ethnically Chinese. Chanthaveth laughs at the suggestion. The Khmer Rouge didn't only target the Chinese. They 'didn't like anybody, even Cambodians,' she says. She's sitting in a plastic chair in her backyard. She's 68 years old and has only one kidney, and no breasts. She's spent much of her life in America on public assistance. She knows poverty. But she didn't come from it. She was a rich girl, the daughter of a colonel in Cambodia, she grew up chauffeurs and maids. She was a rich girl who married a businessman. The Khmer Rouge, she says, 'don't like rich people. They like poor, poor people who live in the jungle or something.' Her husband knew he was a target of their hatred and went into hiding. Later she heard the Khmer Rouge had found him and killed him. She never saw him again after he fled. As the widow of someone who had been killed by the regime, she was tainted, guilty by association for whatever crime her husband had committed. After her husband left, she and the children were taken to a distant village. The former occupants of the village had starved to death. The family and other undesirables were left in the village to starve. In her telling, the village never has a name. They survived by eating whatever they could find in nature. It wasn't much and they knew they couldn't last long. Many of them didn't. 'At nighttime I heard they take the people to kill,' says Chanthaveth. 'I heard the yelling and screaming, one by one.' Chanthaveth knew one night they would come for her and her children. She was lucky though, before they came, the Vietnamese invaded and the Khmer Rouge fled. In 1979 she crossed into Thailand with her children. The next year she was in Indonesia. Two years later she was resettled in Oklahoma City with her mother and step-father, her five children, and her niece. But she had trouble settling down. She married a younger man, divorced him, moved to Boston, then got back together with him and moved to Chicago. Her children, she says, got lost in the moving around. She didn't have time to take care of them. In some ways she feels they raised themselves. They had to. She didn't speak English, she didn't drive, she didn't know how things worked, she did not question when her 14 year old daughter was put in high school, even though her daughter's English language skills were too limited to comprehend high school level classes. In the almost two decades David was behind bars, Chanthaveth saw him five times. For 20 years, she says, she lost him. During this time she survived cancer and had one of her kidneys removed. She lost both her mother and step-father,

neither of whom David was able to see while he was in prison. In the early 2000's she was diagnosed with breast cancer so both of her breasts have been removed. She has high blood pressure and with a single kidney, she does not expect to be healthy enough to travel to Cambodia to visit her son when he is deported. 'If you go, you cannot see me again,' she says. 'I'm going to die here and he not come back.'" I chose to read that section because I think what the, this story in the deportations what I felt was missing in the articles I was able to do and why I wanted to write the book was, the generational impact, how this impacts the whole family and continues this trauma. The trauma that began in Cambodia, I guess I would really say under the Khmer Rouge who ruled from '74 to '79, and the genocide killed 21-25% of the population died of starvation, disease, or execution, and then in the U.S. played a role in this in that we had extensively bombed Cambodia for four years before the Khmer Rouge came to power, so kind of setting the stage for the Khmer Rouge to come into power among other things. And then a lot of Cambodians, more than 150,000 were resettled in the U.S. as refugees. And at the time, a refugee—this was—we didn't have—a lot of times, there were no ESL classes, there was not a lot of recognition. PTSD had only recently I think PTSD was officially recognized maybe in the '80s. So there weren't a lot of things to deal with the trauma these people had gone through and help them adapt, or even language classes to help them in some ways, and there was a lot of, I don't want to say falling through the cracks but there were a lot of problems, a lot were resettled in 1980's. U.S., it was the war on crack, very violent inner cities, David ends up in Long Beach, a lot of gangs there at the time, and a lot of that generation says they got into gangs kind of as a form of self-defense against the others. They were the new ones, they didn't speak English, they were the Asian kids, they had to kind of form gangs to defend themselves. And the problem was their parents a lot of times, like his mom, she didn't drive, she didn't speak English, she didn't know this culture at all. Another of the families, I follow, the mother—I remember when her daughter later is being abused by a boyfriend, literally being beaten up, I asked why she didn't call the police. And she said because, wait "you're not going to call the police, they kill the rich, they're the ones who kill you, they beat you up." So you know, it's just things—as the U.S. we might not of even known how to prepare these people and the adaptations, what needed to be done and so, I wanted to show in this book, that effect and then also for someone like Chanthaveth, the older generation. When her son is deported, the re-traumatization, because under the Khmer Rouge, a big thing was separating families. They took the kids away, they took husbands away from wives, parents from children, then outright just murdered people. But so when they're facing that they could lose their child again and for most sense and purposes they do lose because once they're deported as you know, she's very, not very healthy anymore. Flight to Cambodia, or many flights, and you're talking 24 hours, 32 hours, depending on the kind of flight you get and the layovers and such. So if you're in bad health and you're elderly, really hard to make, also quite expensive and because of all that time, usually need to spend some time in Cambodia so, realistically they don't, they're not going to see that child again so it is a separation for life. And so they are losing the child again. One of, another one, Sithy, who is going to be deported, she had actually been back to Cambodia once before, she lasted one day and had to leave because of the re-traumatization and her own PTSD and memories. She could not, even though the government has changed, although the current leader is former Khmer Rouge, it's not well, well we'll not get into that but anyhow, it's still, they have those memories of the trauma and it's

very hard to go back to that. So I think for me it was showing those generations and also someone like David who, you just heard from his mom, David's in his 40s and he has a 7 year old son. So David was, I think 4 or 5 years old under the Khmer Rouge when his father, he lost his father, and now his son will lose a father, not through death but through permanent separation. And so I think that was important to kind of telling those three generations. I'm going to let Maggie do some talking.

MB: Oh, I mean I enjoy hearing what you're, you know, your introduction so, yeah thank you. Well, I guess, you know, lets kind of go to our first questionnaire which was really about what it was like to have people share these really personal and tragic experiences? How did you negotiate that?

KC: Yeah, I think that was actually a really good question, really difficult. The first story I had written was an article and I actually wanted to follow up, it was a young woman, she had been deported to Cambodia and I wanted to write about her family. She had a son, who was at that time maybe 10-11 years old, in California and a mother in California. And I approached her about it, she'd done the article with me and she said she didn't want her son to be exposed, she didn't want—it's too difficult. She didn't want her parents to talk, she didn't want her son to talk, so I then started putting out feelers and it was very hard to get people to talk. One, because of that re-traumatization, going back on those memories. Two, fear, those subject to deportation are scared to come out in the open. Some do come out in the open, some are living kind of less in the open, so and, distrust, why did I want to do this? There was a lot of that because I wasn't from within the community. So it made—almost all my families were out of Long Beach where there's a large Cambodian community outside of Cambodia. So I made a lot of trips to Long Beach, I made a lot of connections with different people, and David, one of the families I follow, I was able to get David because he actually was part of an activist community trying to fight the deportation. So he was already out there talking, he was open, so he was pretty good. I was able to follow him, I was able to meet Solomon, but it was 2, probably 2 years in to following him, regularly checking up with him, talking with him, that I got to talk to his mom. I'd always met her and seen her but there was always oh, she's not feeling well today, which I'm sure she wasn't actually, she has a lot of health problems. Oh, she doesn't feel comfortable with her English, oh, try another time, another time, another time, and finally I was actually able to talk to her. And her English was actually pretty good. But there was a lot of that. In the other families, I found one family kind of backed out partway through because it was just, it's too much. Because they have this trauma from that and then in the U.S. it was one of the families I didn't get to follow up with, her husband had just been deported and so first she was kind of hopeful something might change, and then I think she lost hope and that's when she didn't follow up, but she had three sons I believe, one was in prison for murder, one had been murdered, a third was in juvenile detention, and then oh no, there were four, and a fourth had died of Leukemia. So we're talking I mean, just trauma on top of trauma and so, to ask them to sit down with me and talk and share all, this was really hard.

MB: Do you have any stories of how you met the other families? Like Touch or San, those are stories that really resonated when I read the book.

KC: Yes, San was great, is was in her '70s, she's an older woman and her daughter Sithy was facing deportation and San and I got to meet because she actually wanted to tell her story. She was at a point, she felt it was really important, she knew she's getting older, that generation that really remembers the Khmer Rouge times well might not be, they're not going to be around forever and she felt it was important to tell and so I met her through kind of a community member who had been helping her. And she, she was great, she really wanted to tell her story and Sithy was open to telling her story and I become very, very, very close with that family, still keep in touch with them. Sithy, last I heard was an Uber driver in Long Beach, [laughter] and she tells her clients about the book, so they are actually doing well. But it was hard to, with that family San credits Sithy, who was a teenager under the Khmer Rouge with helping the family survive. She adapted really well, found ways to steal food to survive. In the U.S., she did not adapt as well and got in trouble with the law, and a lot of abusive relationships. She was abused extensively, and I'd asked her, and she's like, that's what I know. The Khmer Rouge, they abused me, it's what she literally was raised with, so and then she had adult children and then grandchildren so there's just, the impact on that family alone, we're talking dozens of people. And then Touch was, Touch was facing deportation and he was not trying to fight it so much as get a stay of deportation, long enough so he could donate a kidney to his brother who was dying of kidney failure. So again, trauma on top of trauma in these families. And Touch was not as interested in talking to me but the people who are trying to help him get a stay of deportation, told him it would probably be good to talk to the press, so Touch was slower to open up to me and it was over time, and sometimes he would complain about other journalists when I was writing, so it was a little—Touch, I had to handle a little more gently I would say. He had a 16 year old daughter, so that was one of the things too about leaving, and then there was his brother and his parents. So most of them, over time, it would help but it was, it was really hard.

MB: Thank you. So I just also wanted to say that we are going to have a little time for questions from the audience, so we just have a few more that I'm going to kind of frame and then we'll move to the audience. Sound good? What about this one, about crafting the book itself, and I think also, you know, maybe we have some journalism students in here. People are interested in that too so, what's the process of going from reporting on these stories and then creating the book? And also, maybe you can talk a little bit about also that you went to Cambodia itself and did some research there too.

KC: Yeah, and it's interesting on crafting, because, well it's non-fiction and I'm following as it goes, I don't know how it's going to turn out, which is like journalism too. You have an idea for a story, but you never know exactly what's going to happen. On this one, I had originally thought I'd write about families who had been deported, and then I decided for the narrative it was better to talk about those who are facing deportation because then you have some tension in the story; are they going to get deported? Are they not? And that provides the natural tension. And I thought I could still tell what I wanted to tell, but I wanted to show what happens when they go to Cambodia as well. So what I did to make that narrative work and come together was I found those—because luckily while I was writing, none of my people were deported. Some are

still facing deportation, but David was almost picked up in a raid, but luckily was not home at the time, and so was not deported then. So during the book that didn't happen. There was just uncertainty of whether it would happen. But so I went, and when I was writing it, I didn't know, I thought maybe one of them would be deported while I was writing it and I would go and follow up with them in Cambodia. But because they weren't, I went to Cambodia and followed up with their friends or family members who have been deported. So in David's case, it was one of his closest friends who actually, I think he was wearing that friends jacket the night he committed the crime that sent him away. So again, the impact on this community, little aside, but in the Cambodian American community, most of those I've asked say there's not one person in that community who does not know someone who has been deported or subject to deportation. There—and you'll get families over there, brothers, two brothers deported. In David's family there are two of them subject to deportation. Sithy, there are others in her family, not her siblings, but others who are subject to deportation. So I found David's friend over there and saw how he was living and then, same with Touch, I found his friend who had started a tourism business and his friend actually, Sarith, is doing probably better than a lot—they're not considered—in Cambodia, they're considered an American. Here they're considered Cambodian American so they have trouble fitting in there as well. And then with some drug abuse problems or mental health issues and such, untreated, there have been quite a few suicides, some have basically drunk themselves to death, some have been murdered, some are in prison, but Sarith had started his own tourism business so that was great, so he actually had said, when Touch comes, he'll give him a job and he can stay with him and such, so I saw Sarith, and then who else? I saw with—I was supposed to with San, she was an older woman in her '70s, she was supposed to actually meet me and we were going to go see one of her sisters is still in Southeast Asia. But San's husband had died and so that held through on that. But so that was how I was going to pull the narrative together too, is kind of end on Cambodia, what has happened to the friends of those people, who are facing deportation as to what might happen to them.

MB: Yeah. I was wondering if we might shift gears a little bit too and talk about the activism. So this isn't a question I had on here but we forgot to also mention we have this petition that we pulled up from the Southeast Asia Resource Action Council, is that right?

KC: They have these long names.

MB: So we do have a computer in the back if people want to sign on that petition. You can read what it's about and sign on your name but I thought maybe you could just talk a little bit about that activism, you mentioned David, you met him, he was already in the community and out in the public, but could you just share with them kind of what is that, what people are doing?

KC: So what happens with briefly on the deportation, so these are legal permanent residents, came here as refugees for the Southeast Asian American ones we're talking about. And they did not, as refugees, you get legal permanent residence status but you do not automatically get citizenship. In some countries you do automatically get citizenship so the UN has criticized the U.S. for that. Citizenship, you have to wait a number of years, you have to pay a lot of money,

you have to take a difficult test. So there are various reasons that refugees don't always get citizenship. As for David, he came at 4 years old, there's a rule now that if you come as a kid and your parents get citizenship, you automatically get it. That wasn't there at the time, and he always just thought he was legal permanent resident, thought it was permanent. Laws were enacted in the '90s that legal permanent residence can be subject to deportation for crimes they have committed. Crimes including extreme ones, such as murder, but also writing bad checks, joy riding, marijuana, and a lot of drug offenses. The majority of deportations for legal permanent residents are not violent offenses. So there's been some movement to try and fight some of this and one thing is before our last governor, there are a lot of pardons, often at the end of the governor's term, so some Cambodians here in California were able to get pardoned and then retry their cases so they wouldn't be subject to deportation. So that was one thing and I think they're still trying to do that but it kind of loses momentum when there's a new governor, but there is this petition and this petition is to sign to say that you disagree with the deportations because they have increased the deportations and are actively I think in March, they're going to be doing raids, ICE is going to be doing raids on the Cambodian community again, I heard. And so they'll be rounding people up. And so that's just what this petition is about and it's mostly Cambodians and Vietnamese. Vietnamese were not subject to deportation if they came during that large refugee time after the Vietnam War, but Trump is now going after them. I'm not sure if any have actually been deported but he has started going after them so that's another thing, this is signing against.

MB: And I think that's the issue that's really just something to underline is that a lot of the, not only Cambodians, but other Southeast Asians, Vietnamese, you know, Hmong, people from Laos, I mean, they're coming from this tragic and really violent situations, and they're coming as refugees and to not be helped with that process is just really egregious, you know, the U.S. was so involved in creating those conditions like you said, with the bombing of Cambodia for example, that it's shocking that there was not more done to facilitate this and like you said, the parents, a lot of them are just not prepared for life in America, much less, as we all know, filling out government forms, you know, that's like another language. So I think a lot of it is really, just really shocking that this has been allowed to happen. So you know, that's part of why I'm so excited about this book, because I think you really highlight that and for the Cambodian community, and also Southeast Asians generally, they get a little bit pushed away in the corners. We don't often talk about those experiences and so I think it's really important to highlight that.

KC: Yeah. And I think for the community too, until recently they haven't talked about it much either and you talk about with trauma and culture, some cultures and people under trauma, they won't bring it up and things, so I think it was only as deportations become more and more, they have talked more and you're hearing more of the stories. But before, I think there was a lot of, people didn't really know this was happening, so there wasn't as much awareness.

MB: A lack of education too. Yeah. Do people have questions? I was thinking maybe we just start taking questions if people have them. Because we could just kind of go on forever. And we're certainly happy to do that, but I think as we're going, if you have a question just raise

your hand and we'll call on you. Yeah, go ahead. [Pause] So the question was about has deportation always been kind of politicized or is it something that's very polar between Democrats and Republicans or and I guess in doing this research here did you uncover anything about the history?

KC: Yeah, it's definitely—I guess it's probably always been political but I, it's funny, I think that it's not always, there are definitely Republicans who are against deportation as well. And probably Democrats who are for it, I imagine. But what these for the legal permanent residence, it was really in the 1990's that the laws came in that affected this and that, it was actually under Democrats, so that would have been Clinton. And it was after, and this is what often happens with policy, at least in my limited political experience, whenever there's fear you get knee jerk reactions that then long-term effects people haven't thought about as much. So it was after the Oklahoma City bombing that these laws in the 1990's came in effect it really left the legal permanent residents for deportation and those laws were meant, I think they were anti-terrorism laws and they basically gave judges on deportation cases, less ability to look at individual cases and weigh in, it was more like, okay this person did this, they have to be deported, and also they made those crimes, felonies that were not previously felonies and if you have a felony, then you can be deported if you're a legal permanent resident. So I guess, to answer that, it's not—until Trump, Obama actually deported quite a lot of people, so—I think wasn't he, the most—anyhow, so deportations happen under both sides. Trump has done more now and has really, I guess, kind of focused on—and the biggest flight of Cambodians back to Cambodia happened in December. So there has been more but it was happening and it did actually—the laws that put it in effect were under Democrats.

MB: I was thinking maybe you could connect to tell them a little bit about the M.O.U. issue. Because that's kind of, I think, where were seeing Trump be more forceful with saying like, you have to accept this. So maybe if you could explain that just a little bit for them?

KC: Yeah, it's, it's really interesting the—so there's a memorandum of understanding and it's an agreement between Cambodia and the U.S. that Cambodia agrees to take back their deportees. It was signed in 2002 or 2003, I think 2002, and so everyone says, okay, so why doesn't Cambodia just say, okay, well we won't take them, and problem solved. Well, the U.S. has a lot more political power than Cambodia and so Cambodia did try under activists pushing for that, I think it was 2 years ago now, Cambodia said okay, you know what, we're not going to do this unless you do this and so the U.S. right away said, okay, we're not giving visas to Cambodians. So that kind of ended that and Cambodia agreed and that memorandum of understanding—Laos does not have one with the U.S. so there has been—ethnically he was Laotian but he had somehow ended up in Cambodia, so this was a gentleman who then was deported to Cambodia. Or they can just keep you in detention for a while if you're Laotian so they're different things. Vietnam, the memorandum of understanding, was if you came during certain years before, I think it was sometime in the '90s, basically if you came during that refugee long time frame, you couldn't be subject to deportation. Trump has now tried to deport people who came as refugees during that time, despite the memorandum of understanding. And I remember asking some people, well how can he do that? Well, it's a memorandum of



understanding, it's not a legal document, so he can actually do it. So and there's been a lot of fight and pushback on that and so some people told me no, then that wasn't happening and then people said it's happening again now, so I'm not sure where we are on that. But that's kind of what's going on there.

MB: Yeah and it just shows that there is quite a bit of complexity to this.

KC: God, yeah.

MB: And you know, so it kind of, going back to the question you know, there are layers of how this is politicized really.

KC: Yeah.

MB: And you know, beyond like party politics but global issues and geopolitics so, yeah.

KC: Yeah, I think that's a big thing too. Knowing the pressure like Vietnam can't say so much about, we won't take them because yeah, then they'll, won't have their visas, Vietnamese can't come here for student visas, work visas, visiting visas, and so it's a big. The U.S. has a lot of power to play around with in that.

MB: Okay, thank you. Any other questions? I wanted to leave a few minutes just for people to chat and also Katya did bring some copies of the book in the back so if people want to buy one or have a book signed, or just ask any one on one. Does that sound good with everyone?

[Applause]

[Music]

Moderator: This podcast is a 2019 production of the Robert E. Kennedy Library with music by Doug Irion.

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