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## Central Coast journalist writes book about Ukraine in the post-Soviet Union era

*Lance Orozco*

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Published June 9, 2023 at 11:57 AM PDT

She's a Central Coast journalist, and college lecturer who's had a front row seat to the turmoil in Ukraine. No, it's not the crisis the nation is facing now, with the war with Russia. When Ukraine split from the Soviet Union three decades ago, it found itself in crisis as it tried to establish an independent government, and economy.

"People didn't understand, especially here, what post-Soviet life was like," said Katya Cengel, who was a young, 20-something journalist at the time. "We knew there was a Soviet Union, and we knew it died. There's democracy, right? But things don't really work like that."

After Cengel graduated from college, she knew she wanted to pursue journalism. But, she also had a sense of adventure, which ended up with her working halfway around the world, in Eastern Europe. In 1998, she started her big adventure.

"In Latvia, I was working at an English-language newspaper," said Cengel. Then, she started freelancing for some Bay Area

newspapers, and the BBC.

In 2000, she moved to Ukraine. There, she would not only find stories about a country struggling to define its future, but would also find love, meeting her husband.

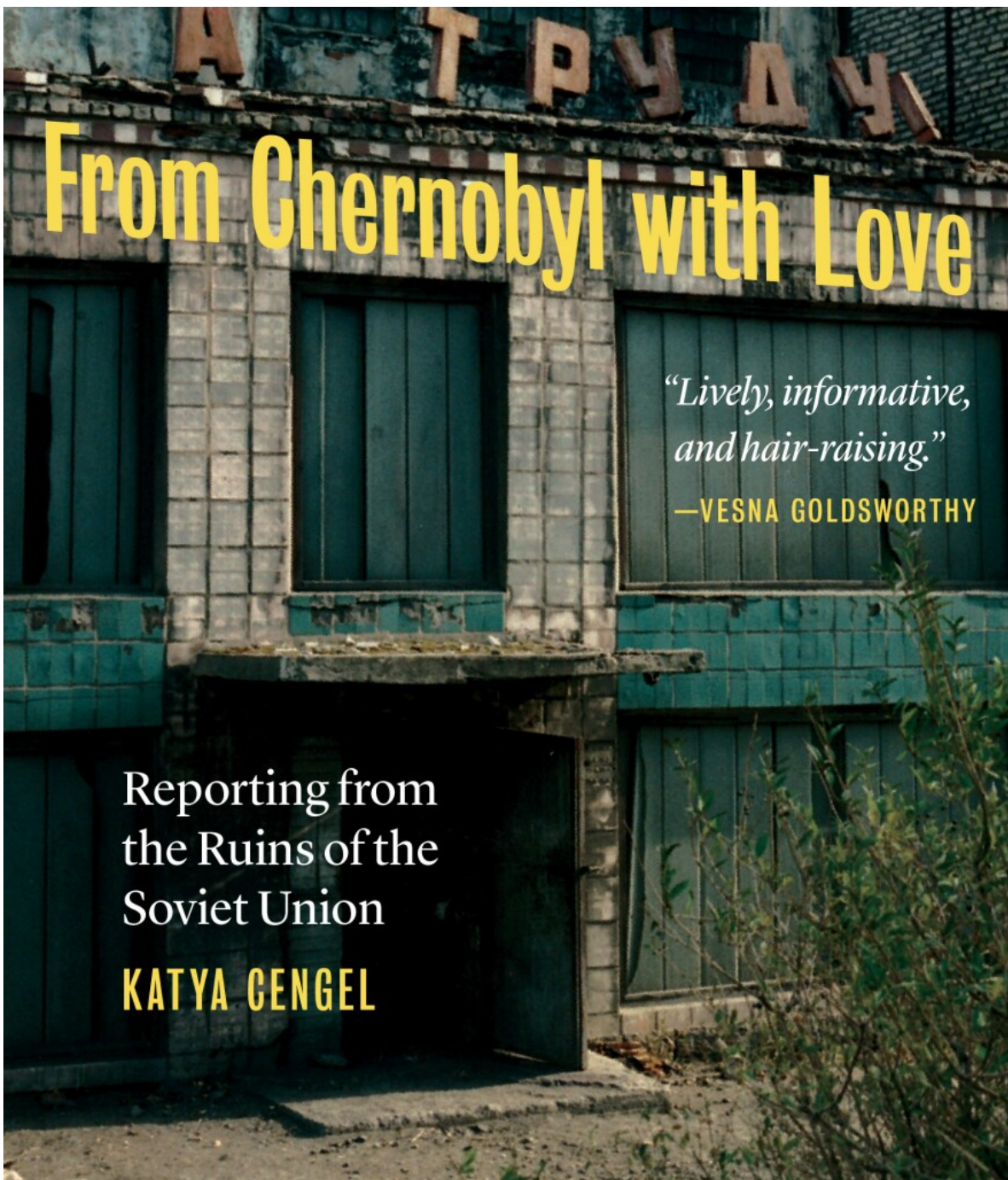
There was turmoil around the government, with corruption, massive unemployment, and a lack of basic resources. People might have power for an hour a day, and water for two hours a day. And, the country was still struggling with the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster. Cengel had a lot to cover. She lived there for three years.

"These people have this spirit, and humor in dealing with it," said Cengel.

She wrote a lot of stories about the ongoing situation. But, over the years she realized she had all these stories which painted a picture of what Ukraine had endured, from Stalin's brutality towards the region in the 1930's, the Nazi invasion in the 1940's, and then the Soviet Union using the region as its bread basket for decades.

She looked for a way to package some of these stories. It led to a book by the Cal Poly San Luis Obispo journalism lecturer about her time in Ukraine. It's called "From Chernobyl with Love: Reporting from the Ruins of the Soviet Union."





Through her experiences, she tries to tell the backstory of the people who have tried to rebuild their countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"I think through my eyes, and experiences, and this love story...I had married a Ukrainian I met at Chernobyl...which always kind of made for a great story...I thought if you weave these stories together, it gives us a narrative arc," said Cengel.

Cegel will speak about her book, and her experiences at a Sunday afternoon event at the Santa Barbara Public Library. She'll be joined by Oksana Yakushko, a UC Santa Barbara psychology lecturer who is from Ukraine. The 2 p.m. event at the library is free, and open to the public