

**From Brooklyn to Binghamton:  
The Saeedpour Kurdish Collection at Binghamton  
University**

Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA  
August 17, 2013

**SLIDE 1**

Hello everyone. Again, thank you for being here so early on the last day of SAA2013.

**SLIDE 2**

**The Kurds**

The Kurds have been living in southwest Asia for centuries. Today about 40 million Kurds live in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and parts of the former Soviet Union. In the last decade of the 1900s, a substantial number of Kurds migrated to western countries such as France, Germany, Sweden, and the United States. Even without a formal nation state, the Kurds remain a large and influential minority in the Middle East. Since the rise of nationalism and the repression of minorities during the last phase of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurds have struggled to establish a state of their own rather than a divided homeland. Kurds faced physical pressure and violence, cultural

assimilation, and ethnic cleansing in the nation-states they have lived in and, unfortunately, the Kurdish struggle hasn't been paid a lot of attention, which is a major incentive for our Curator implementing an oral history project. In spite of this, the Kurdish people maintained their ethnic identity, which allows *them* to share their experiences and allows *us* to take a look into their world.

### **SLIDE 3**

#### **Vera Beaudin Saeedpour**

Born in Vermont in 1930, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour earned a Master's Degree in Philosophy from the University of Vermont in 1973 and a doctorate in Education from Columbia University. Vera's journey of collecting to document Kurdish history and culture began when she met an Iranian Kurd, Homayoun Saeedpour, whom she married in 1976 while working on her dissertation. Unfortunately the marriage only lasted for 5 years, as Homayoun died in 1981. However, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour's passionate work to learn about and to educate others about the plight of the Kurdish people and to give the Kurdish people a voice survived until her own death in 2010.

### **SLIDE 4**

#### **The Brooklyn Brownstone**

Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour opened the Kurdish Heritage Foundation of America with the Kurdish Library in 1986 and the Kurdish Museum in 1988 in her Brooklyn Prospect Heights brownstone. Here, journalists, scholars, students, politicians and others came to research Kurdish history and culture under the guidance of Vera.

She initiated the Kurdish Program under Cultural Survival, a nonprofit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts which is dedicated to defending the rights of indigenous people. Her scholarly publications, *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, featuring scholarly articles on Kurdish culture, history and contemporary affairs, and the quarterly, *Kurdish Life*, a documented chronicle and analysis of contemporary events and issues, are part of the collections of leading university libraries.. A tireless researcher and activist, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour also wrote extensively and lectured both domestically and internationally on Kurdish affairs.

## **SLIDE 5**

### **Visitors register from the Kurdish Library & Museum**

Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour once told the Associated Press “I know the Kurds better than any Westerner living”<sup>1</sup> and, indeed, this personal collection is a testament to that being one of, if not *the* most, significant collection of materials dedicated to Kurds in the United States. Dr. Saeedpour was a scholar, an author and an outspoken activist. The Kurdish American Education Society (KAES) stated that “it would not be an exaggeration to call her the mother of Kurdish cultural studies in this continent”<sup>2</sup> and *Kurdistan Commentary* called her “a passionate advocate for truth or justice.”<sup>3</sup>

## **SLIDE 6**

### **A trip to Fort Plain, NY**

Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour and her collection had moved to Fort Plain, NY, located in Montgomery County, NY a year or so before her death. To view the collection, the Library’s Dean, our Director of Collections and I made a trip in November 2010 to see it. Here you see Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour’s daughter, Rebecca, showing our Director of Collections, Ed Shepard some materials from the collection.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Douglas, “Vera B. Saeedpour, Scholar and Archivist of the Kurdish Culture, Dies at 80,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/08/nyregion/08saeedpour.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> “Remembering Dr. Vera Saeedpour,” The website of VOKRadio, accessed July 26, 2011, <http://www.vokradio.com/content/view/1207/44/>

<sup>3</sup> “Vera Beaudin Saeedpour,” *Kurdistan Commentary*, accessed July 26, 2011, <http://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/vera-beaudin-saeedpour/>

## **SLIDE 7**

### **More Fort Plain**

The house in Fort Plain was a beautiful old Victorian. As you can see, the collection was scattered amongst various areas of the house. Here you see tubs of clothing and other textiles.

## **SLIDE 8**

### **More Fort Plain**

And here you see records stored in the house's basement.

## **SLIDE 9**

### **The Collection comes to BU**

The collection was moved to Binghamton University in February 2011. The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection is a significant assemblage of materials documenting Kurdish culture and, as I have said, is reported to be the largest of its kind in North America and may be the only one of its kind in *any* academic environment. The collection contains more than 3,000 books, journals and newspapers along with oral histories, artifacts including jewelry and musical instruments, clothing and textiles, maps, photographs, artwork,

and other unique materials. Correspondence with politicians, universities, Kurdish friends, writers and people of all different backgrounds documents the evolution of this collection.

## **SLIDE 10**

### **Processing**

Processing the collection was not without its challenges. The collection came to us in an assortment of plastic bins and boxes, largely without any organization. Also, the materials were accompanied by a lot of cat hair as Vera's daughter told us that she would often allow stray cats to roam the library and museum. At the time, we were also transitioning to a new digital preservation software and we also wanted to be certain that we were creating culturally-correct metadata fields to describe the materials properly. Also, we were challenged by the lack of proper equipment and facilities and were using what we have in-house to document the collection, which, I'm sure is often the case when a repository receives a collection of this size with such diverse materials. Cost was another issue as we hired and trained students to assist with the project, purchased exhibit cases and other materials for a major exhibition of collection materials, and purchased supplies for the preservation of the physical materials. Finally, we were coping with balancing sensitivity to the political state of the Kurdish people and their relationship to other ethnic groups. We were recognizing the

Kurdish people and their history but, as a research institution, we felt that it was not our role to be culturally biased.

## **SLIDE 11**

### **Exhibiting**

The Curator of the Collection, Aynur de Rouen, has become very passionate about it as it is closely related to her own culture and life experience (she is Turkish). She has made certain that the materials, presented online, in exhibits, and used by patrons in our reading room, are presented in a respectful and culturally correct manner. This meant extensive research including translating the names of collection items into Kurdish (e.g. male pants in Kurdish are *şerwal*) and consulting with members of the Kurdish community.

## **SLIDE 12**

### **Digitizing**

Binghamton University Libraries Special Collections and Digital Initiatives are working to create digital surrogates of a wide variety of materials in this collection. Currently, nearly 325 items have been digitized, mostly jewelry and textiles.

All digitized images will be stored using the digital preservation system, Rosetta, and made viewable to the public through a discovery and delivery tool. In addition, we will create an online exhibit of materials from the collection using Omeka, the open source web-publishing platform. Through our efforts, we are both recognizing the Kurdish people and their history and, as a research institution, are providing access to the materials for scholarly research.

To our knowledge, no such digital collection of Kurdish materials is available anywhere in the world. We began our digitization efforts by photographing clothing, jewelry, textiles and small artifacts. Then detailed metadata, including the vernacular vocabulary, was created for each object. We are continuing by digitizing manuscript materials and photographs in the collection. In addition, oral history interviews are being conducted with members of the local Kurdish community to gain insight and impressions of this collection and its relation to the Kurdish culture. These will also be preserved in Rosetta and will be streamed online.

## **SLIDE 13**

### **Our first event**

The public was introduced to the Saeedpour Collection on September 13, 2011. Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour's family was

invited, coming from as far away as Switzerland. Janet Klein, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the University of Akron, addressed the topic of Kurdish Studies and the importance of the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library and Museum Collection at Binghamton University. This presentation can be viewed on YouTube by searching Kurdish Library & Museum Collection at Binghamton University. Also, tours of the permanent exhibit were given throughout the weekend.

As there are Dual-Diploma Programs between Binghamton University and Turkish University partners, which were implemented in 2003, we have a fair contingent of Turkish students at our university. Turkish students at Binghamton University threatened to protest and march on the Library. They felt as if we were supporting Kurdish propaganda which threatened the large Turkish student body. This misunderstanding came to an end with the help of intervention by Turkish student advisors. It was explained that the Libraries' main role was cultural and academic and no political agenda was involved.

## **SLIDE 14**

### **Spreading the word**

We feel that this collection is very important for scholarship and pedagogy. Through presentations, including this one, currently scheduled (so far!) in the United States, Wales and Turkey, we

hope to introduce the international scholarly community to the Saeedpour Kurdish Collection. The materials in this collection, including the unique oral history component, can be used by scholars in their study of the Kurdish people, their history and culture, and in the writing of books, articles, dissertations, and theses.

This collection can also be used to educate others about Kurdish history and culture through integration into Binghamton University's curriculum. This collection can be used in the teaching of classes in a number of disciplines including History, Art, Anthropology and Sociology. The unique oral history collection which is being created can be used for pedagogic activities related to understanding of the collective memory of the Kurdish refugees in Upstate New York.

## **SLIDE 15**

### **Establishment of an oral history program**

We have committed ourselves to the continuation of this documentation of Kurdish life and culture through the development of an oral history program to enhance the Saeedpour collection. We have commenced an oral history project with the approximately seventy Kurdish families living in the Binghamton-area, mainly refugee families from the Iraqi area. Respondents are sharing and remembering their homeland

and telling us about their culture, everyday life and political and social history.

Oral history interviews are currently being conducted by Aynur de Rouen, Curator of the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection and Digitization Specialist, and a Kurdish Binghamton University student, Erdem Ilter. Another Binghamton University student, Leslie Cody, is assisting with transcriptions.

All interviews are being and will be recorded as digital sound files. These digital files will be preserved in our Libraries' digital preservation system, Rosetta, thus ensuring preservation indefinitely. Then, these interviews can be provided for public use through the Libraries' discovery and delivery tool, Primo. We will also transcribe each interview thus providing access to the interviews in print format (this will be especially helpful for hearing-impaired students). Access to these culturally important interviews to students, faculty and staff throughout campus will provide them with global knowledge of an often unfamiliar people, the Kurds.

We feel that we are picking up where Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour left off as our oral history project will provide a voice for the Kurdish people. Adding these oral histories to the collection will further serve our goal of preserving and sharing the rich traditions and history of the Kurdish people.

## **SLIDE 16**

### **Connecting with the local Kurdish community**

Here you see members of the Binghamton Chapter of the American Kurdish Council involved in the “Adopt-a-Highway” program.

The Saeedpour Collection and our oral history project has, indeed, connected us to the local Kurdish Community. The Curator of the Collection and her students are regularly invited to events and even weddings!

This activity is directly related to Binghamton University’s 2010-2015 Strategic Plan Goals of engagement with our community and enhancing student preparation for a global and diverse society.

## **SLIDE 17**

### **Our goals**

Dr. Beaudin Saedpour made it her life mission to document all aspects of Kurdish culture and act as an activist for Kurds everywhere. Our goal is to preserve and share the rich traditions and history of the Kurdish people, providing a balanced perspective and enabling researchers to examine and evaluate a

diverse culture. Through our efforts at Binghamton University, we hope to provide worldwide access to this extensive collection, educate others about Kurdish culture, and provide recognition for the Kurdish people.

Archives power indeed!

**SLIDE 18**

**Thank you!**