

From Brooklyn to Binghamton: The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection at Binghamton University

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Abstract

The Kurds number over 40 million and are a diasporic people scattered throughout the world, often far from their homeland. An American, Dr. Vera Beaudin Saeedpour started the Kurdish Heritage Foundation, Kurdish Library and Kurdish Museum all out of her home in Brooklyn, NY in the early 1980s. Her dedication to the documentation of Kurdish history and culture lasted until her death in 2010. Honoring her final wishes, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour's children generously donated the entire collection to the Binghamton University Libraries. This article describes the efforts of Binghamton University Libraries' Special Collections to process and preserve this large collection and through collaboration, outreach, and the collection of oral histories with Iraqi Kurdish refugees who are currently living in the Binghamton area, continue the mission of Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour and honor the history, culture and struggle of the Kurds which has received little attention and remained relatively undocumented until now.

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Southwest Asia has been home for the Kurds for several centuries. By the end of the twentieth century, many Kurds had left their homeland in the Middle East and started to migrate to the West. Long before the emergence of modern states in the region, the Kurds had engaged in a continuous struggle to create their own formal nation-state. The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Collection is a significant assemblage of materials documenting Kurdish culture and history and is regarded as one of the most comprehensive and well-documented collections of its kind in North America.

Upon receiving the collection in February 2011, Binghamton University Libraries' Special Collections began processing the collection, determining its preservation needs and creating digital surrogates of a variety of materials in the Saeedpour Collection. In addition, in January 2013, we began the development of an oral history program to further the documentation of Kurdish life and culture. The overall goal is to preserve and share the rich "collective memory" of the Kurdish people. 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.

Who was Vera?

In the New York Times, Dr. Vera Beaudin Saeedpour, scholar, author and founder of the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library and Museum, stated “I know the Kurds better than any Westerner living” (Martin, 2010). She devoted her life as a passionate activist publicizing the plight of the Kurds and documenting Kurdish history and culture.

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. Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour’s journey of collecting to document Kurdish history and culture began when she met an Iranian Kurd, Homayoun Saeedpour, a civil engineering student whom she married in 1976 while working on her dissertation. Unfortunately the marriage only lasted five years, as Homayoun died in 1981. Even though Homayoun Saeedpour objected

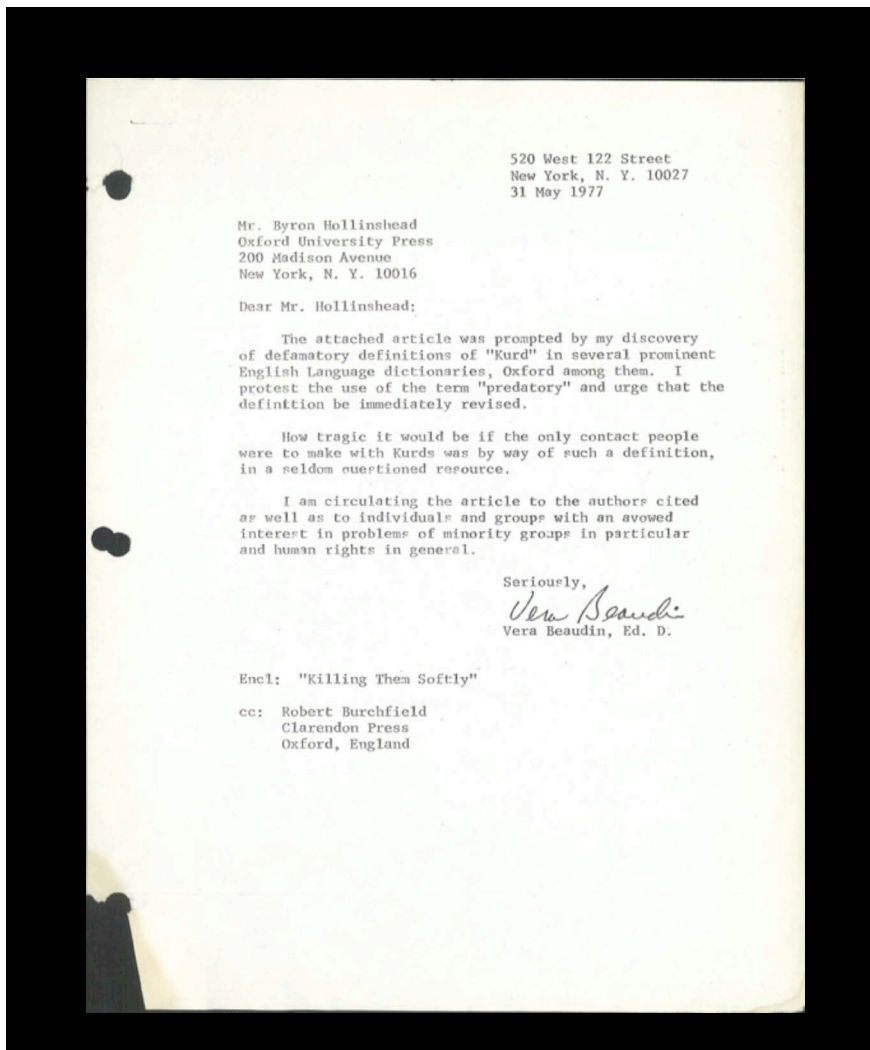


Figure 1. Dr. Vera Beaudin Saeedpur’s letter to Oxford Dictionary. (The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection).

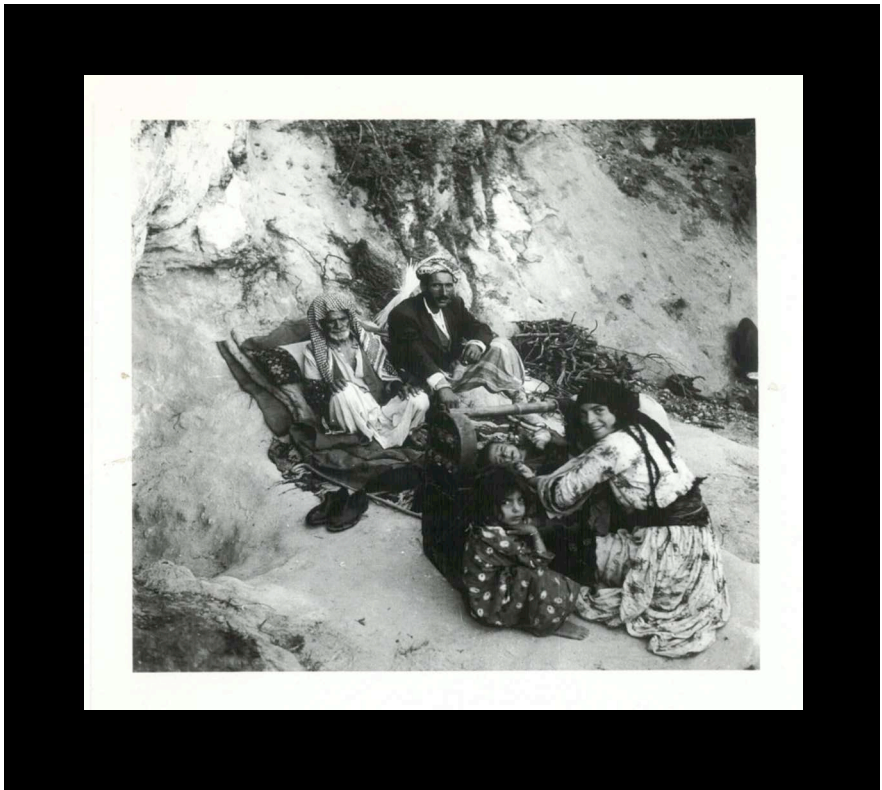


Figure 2. Iraqi Kurds Living in the Mountains, 1960s. (The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection).

to Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour's involvement in Kurdish affairs, she felt differently and, as she put it, "the responsibility that goes with knowing" created a path for her passionate work to learn about and to educate others on Kurdish culture and history and to give the Kurdish people a voice, which survived until her own death in 2010 (Mazzrins, 1991).

The first bold step Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour made regarding Kurdish advocacy was in 1977 when she contacted the Oxford Dictionary to remove the derogatory description of "Kurd" in their dictionary, which included the adjective "predatory." As Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour included in her letter, "How tragic it would be if the only contact people were to make with Kurds was by way of such a definition, in a seldom questioned resource" (Figure 1) (personal communication, May 31, 1977). This led Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour to pursue her advocacy for the Kurds. At first, 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. With the expansion of the program, she opened the Kurdish Heritage Foundation of America with the Kurdish Library in 1986. Her success with these initiatives inspired the creation of the Kurdish Museum in 1988 in her Brooklyn Prospect Heights brownstone, where journalists, scholars, students, politicians and others came to research Kurdish history and culture under the guidance of Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour. The



Figure 3. Newspaper sample. (The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection).

collection Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour compiled over the years consists of 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 (Figure 2, Figure 3). Correspondence with politicians, universities, Kurdish friends, writers and people of all different backgrounds documents the evolution of this collection. This assemblage of materials, which documents the Kurdish heritage, is reported to be the largest of its kind in North America.

A tireless researcher and activist, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour also wrote extensively and lectured both domestically and internationally on Kurdish affairs. Her publications, *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies and Kurdish Life*, feature scholarly articles on Kurdish culture, history and contemporary affairs and are part of the collections of leading university libraries. Later in life, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour and her collection moved to Fort Plain, NY, located in Montgomery County, NY, where she fell ill. After her death, nearly a year later, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour’s children donated the collection to Binghamton University in February 2011.

Our Efforts

Upon receiving the collection, our primary goals were to arrange and describe the materials to be used by patrons in the Special Collections reading room (Figure 4). We also wanted to create both permanent and



Figure 4. Before and after: from the basement to a processed collection. (Photograph by authors, 2011).



Figure 5. Before and after: from bins to a cultural exhibit. (Photograph by authors, 2011).

online exhibits in a respectful and culturally correct manner (Figure 5). The majority of the processed materials are stored in acid-free boxes that cover over 700 linear feet. These boxes are housed in the secure stacks within our Special Collections department, and are available for use and reference by request. The remainder of the materials is displayed as a permanent exhibit in our library in the Kurdish Room, which patrons can visit and learn about Kurdish heritage and artifacts. The goal is to digitize the entire collection and make it available online for national and international scholars and researchers.

The Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection was publicly introduced on September 26, 2012, which included a lecture by Janet Klein, Ph.D., Associate Professor of History at the University of Akron followed by a reception. It was during this event that several Kurdish students brought it to our attention that there is a significant local Kurdish community living in the Binghamton area, most of whom migrated to the United State in large numbers by the end of the 1990s. This was not the first time the Kurds had to flee their homeland.

Brief history of the Kurds

This article makes no pretense of providing comprehensive overview of Kurdish history. Yet, some historical background is essential to understand the position of the Kurdish refugees in the Binghamton area. The Kurds have been living in southwest Asia for centuries (Figure 6). Today, about 40 million Kurds live in Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, 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. Although they do not have their own nation-state, Kurds have remained a large and influential minority group in the Middle East by protecting their cultural identities and national struggle. 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 in place of a divided homeland. Kurds faced physical pressure and violence, cultural assimilation, and ethnic cleansing in the nation-states they lived in. And, in some countries such as Syria and Turkey, their identities were not even recognized. At the end of World War I, the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 included the creation of Kurdistan, which was never implemented (McDowall, 2005, p. 115). Furthermore, Turkey, Iran and Iraq engaged in an agreement not to recognize independent Kurdistan. All of these developments led to a series of Kurdish rebellions and harsh retaliations by Turkish and Iranian governments in addition to their assimilation policies

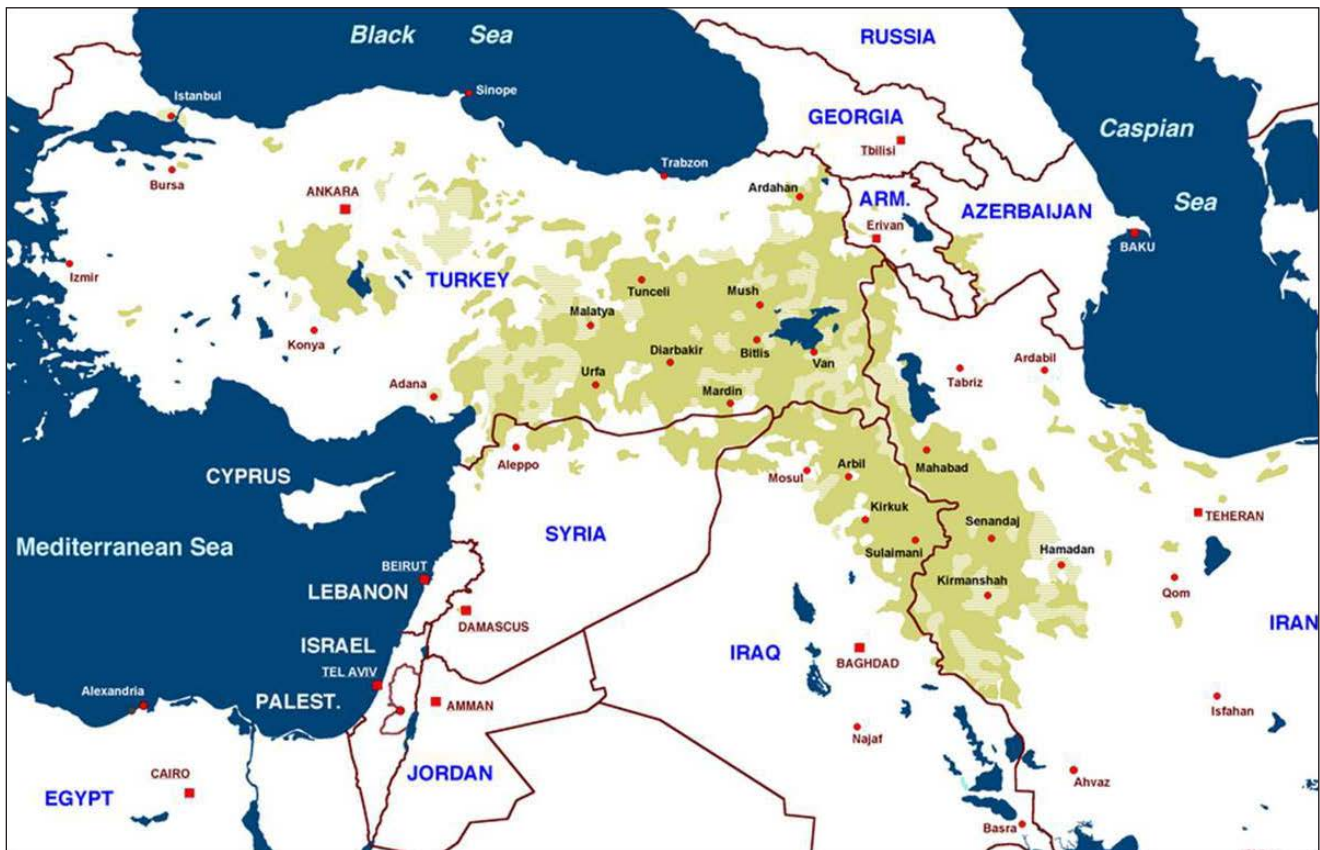


Figure 6. Distribution of Kurds in Middle East. (<http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml>).

(Meiselas, 1997, p.64). In Iraq, Kurds have faced similar repression. The situation gradually worsened and reached a point in 1970 when the United Nations had to interfere, which resulted in a ceasefire. Reforms implemented by the Autonomy Law of 1974 came to an end with Saddam Hussein's attack on Kurdish villages in 1975. Events later took a turn for the worse, when Kurds supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988. This time, Saddam Hussein retaliated by bombing Kurdish villages and using chemical weapons. In 1988, Saddam Hussein launched his infamous Anfal campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan during which between 50,000 and 100,000 Kurds were killed and disappeared, according to Human Rights Watch (Kinsley, 1991). In the town of Halabja, the Iraqi regime's warplanes gassed five thousand Kurds in March 1988 (Wahlbeck, 1999, p. 52). Later, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991, the Kurdish uprising was put down by Iraqi troops, which caused at least one million Kurds to flee Iraq and stay in refugee camps in Iran and Turkey. Finally, a no-fly zone was created by the coalition forces. However, starting in 1992, two Kurdish Iraqi factions started a war for power, which finally resulted in a power-sharing agreement in 1998. It was during this time that thousands of Kurds migrated to the United States. The majority of these migrants

settled in Nashville, Tennessee, but some families chose to settle in the Binghamton area, where we initiated our oral history project.

Adding to the collection - the Kurdish Oral History Project

The Kurdish Oral History Project, which began in February 2013, is an effort to enhance the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection. We have undertaken this project with the goal of interviewing approximately sixty-five Kurdish families, mainly refugees from the Iraqi region. Interviewees included both men and women between the ages of 18 and 65, all of whom reside in the Greater Binghamton area. The questions posed to these refugees pertain to their life in their place of origin and how they constructed their lives in diaspora, as well as the oppression they faced, their culture, and family.

In order to connect with the local Kurdish population and create trusting relationships, we decided to immerse ourselves in their community. Interviewees were selected through official networks such as KRG (Kurdish Regional Government), AKC (American Kurdish Council, New York Chapter), and social networks such as university-based organizations. Additionally, we developed relationships with individuals and families by attending celebrations and commemorating Kurdish events. Once these individuals agreed to meet with us, in-depth interviews were conducted either at their residences, which allowed us to observe their current domestic setting, or in our offices at Binghamton University. However, it became clear that interviewing at respondents' residences made the interviewees feel more at ease, which made the interviews significantly more productive. In a comfortable and relaxed setting, the interviewees were more engaged and revealed more information, treating us like friends or relatives. Each informal interview session lasted a minimum of two hours. Interviews were recorded so that we could return to the interview at a later time to transcribe them and gather crucial information. The collective memory, and individual accounts of the past, oppression, assimilation, exclusion, and "othering," along with the intertwining relationship between the struggle and resistance, contributed to the strength of the Kurdish identity. The narratives provided explicit details of their forced departures from their homes to survive from violent uprisings and wars, struggle against the imposed order, and harsh conditions in the mountains, refugee camps and diaspora. Their desire to escape conflict, search for

protection, and obtain human rights played an important role in Kurds leaving their homeland as it is clearly stated by one of the Kurdish refugees:

When I was born, there was war going on in our village. When I was about 6 years old, we had to leave our village, because the regime wanted to burn the houses and kill the Kurds. We went to the mountains, and spent 10 days there. No water, no food, no anything. Many people were dying, many people were sick. We eventually made our way back here, I mean the city of Dohuk. But in 1991, everything was worse. I remember losing one of my shoes during the twelve-day walk to Turkey. This was one of the most difficult times in my life. The refugee camp was a nightmare! (Anonymous interviewee, personal communication, May 25, 2013).

These refugees linked their troubled past to the present in order to establish their “Kurdishness.” The collective Kurdish identity in diaspora was further emphasized with their attachment to their homeland. This longing for home added further to their identity, which had a profound impact on the ways in which the older generations are currently raising their children in America. These Iraqi Kurds used memory of original place to form a community in which they continue their commemoration practices, everyday life and socio-spatial practices. Efforts through which these refugees share their experiences and their collective past in Kurdistan act to teach with the younger generations about the Kurdish traditions – values, gender norms, interaction patterns – and for the continuity of their “Kurdishness.” Living in a close community helps them not only to preserve these customs, but also to keep their collective memory growing.

Upon completion of interviewing in the Binghamton area, our goal is to expand our reach to Nashville, Tennessee, where currently about 11,000 Kurdish refugees reside: the largest Kurdish community in the U.S. Eventually, all interviews will be provided for public use through the Libraries’ discovery and delivery tool. We are also planning to transcribe each interview thus providing access to the interviews in print format, which 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.

We feel that both the Saeedpour Kurdish Collection and the Kurdish Oral History Project have not only significant scholarly implications and recognition in both the national and international communities, but also align with the University’s overall scope dealing with sustainable communities. Binghamton University has significant existing history in researching sustainable communities. Until now, the University’s main focus had dealt with Middle Eastern and

Turkish Studies. By including Kurdish Studies in the University's reach, we feel that perhaps both the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection and the Kurdish Oral History Project could be used to establish the foundation for scholarly research for this marginalized group. These efforts would contribute not only 'expertise in the area of sustainable communities' in the Binghamton University Libraries' Special Collections, but also within the University as a whole. Furthermore, it is significant that there is no large Kurdish collection or ongoing oral history project in North America such as ours.

The interviews combined with the materials already held in the Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection have the potential of creating an important and internationally-known research collection related to the Kurds. Such a collection would be crucial to any scholar worldwide researching Kurds and Kurdish culture. In addition, there are many opportunities for collaboration between the curator of this collection and faculty in the fields above including research, teaching, and presentations.

It is even possible that this project will plant the seeds for partnership with universities in Erbil, Kurdistan, providing future opportunities for exchange of teaching and research faculty, study abroad opportunities for BU students, and the attraction of Kurdish students to study at BU. We feel that we are picking up where Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour left off with our oral history project in providing 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 Kurds.

Conclusion

Dr. Beaudin Saedpour made it her life mission to document all aspects of Kurdish culture and to act as an activist for Kurds everywhere. 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" and *Kurdistan Commentary* called her "a passionate advocate for truth or justice." 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. This will enable a better understanding of Kurdish history, culture, and lifestyles of Kurdish refugees in both Iraqi Kurdistan and the diaspora to the Binghamton area. While referring to her collection, Dr. Beaudin Saeedpour once stated that "There is nothing for the Kurds like this anywhere (Goldberg, 1986, p.12)." We will continue to collect and enhance this collection for both the legacy of Dr. Vera Beaudin Saeedpour and all of the Kurds around the world.

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