

Rudolph C. Bambas and Frieda Derdeyn Bambas

*A Joint Biography*

*By Sasha Johnson*

Professor Rudolph Charles Bambas taught courses at the University of Oklahoma's English Department from 1949 until 1985. He was a philologist by training; his courses focused on the languages and literatures of Old English, Middle English, Old High German, Middle High German, and Old Norse. He and Frieda Derdeyn Bambas were married 54 years, from June 15, 1942, until Rudolph's death on August 8, 1996. Frieda, who died in 2005, demonstrated her lifelong commitment to education by the foundation of many professorships and scholarships. These include, at the University of Oklahoma, the Rudolph C. Bambas Memorial Professorship, Scholarship, and Research Assistantship and the Frieda Derdeyn Bambas Professorship of Piano, currently held by Prof. Edward Gates. Other foundations went to Belmont University, Carnegie Mellon Institute, Johns Hopkins University, Middlebury College, and Wabash College. Both Rudolph and Frieda had earned doctoral degrees and had been involved in education for most of their adult lives. The following account is a brief biographical sketch of Rudolph and Frieda Bambas, based primarily on a collection of letters and other documents donated by Frieda's nephew, Conrad Derdeyn of Austin, Texas. These papers have revealed the history of a remarkable couple, whose devotion to education and to each other is commemorated in the legacy they have left for the future.

This is a story about a couple who lived and loved during the tumultous twentieth century. It begins in Europe, but it is an American story, spanning both World Wars and centering for the most part in small-town Oklahoma, when the state was very young. It is a story about expectations and disappointments, and about hope, about ordinary people who strove to find happiness in each other when the world surrounded them with challenges and change. It is a story about death and regret, and the attempt to make peace with the past.

The story begins in 1905 in western Belgium, in a town called Roeselare, with a little girl who had a very long name: Frieda Gabriele Marie Joseph Derdeyn. Frieda was the youngest child, with four sisters and four brothers. Her mother, Sylvie Marie Derdeyn, had come from the nearby town of Rumbeke. Frieda's father, Hector Derdeyn, was an ambitious and enterprising man who worked as a piano maker, merchant, music teacher, and chocolatier before moving to America at the age of 57. In 1912, Hector Derdeyn secured a position as church organist and piano tuner in Jacksonville, Illinois. Four of Frieda's older siblings had already moved to America, two settling in Pittsburgh and two in Illinois. No record remains of what motivated the Derdeyns' migration, but it was well timed. In August 1914, Germany invaded Belgium from the east, aiming for the French border; by late September, only the far western edges of Belgium remained free. Roeselare, in West Flanders, was overrun with German soldiers within a few months. Somehow, Sylvie, then 52, and her 9-year-old daughter Frieda escaped. Interviewed by journalists in Pittsburgh, en route to Jacksonville, Sylvie reported that not a single man between the ages of 20 and 35 remained in Roeselare, whose population used to be 27,000. Her son Albert was one of those fighting at the front. By December Sylvie and Frieda had joined Hector in Illinois.  
    Jacksonville, home to a variety of colleges and schools, and to a population of roughly 16,000, billed itself as the "Athens of the West." This may have been a factor in Hector's decision to move there. The family remained in Illinois until the autumn of 1917, when Hector decided that he would again try his hand at a new profession: farming. Accordingly, he bought a considerable amount of "Indian land" in Oklahoma, which had achieved statehood only ten years before. He and his family traveled by train to the small town of Pauls Valley. Half of their train-car was filled with personal belongings and the other with bushels of field corn, some of which Hector used to pay for the journey. The new venture went well; Hector established a successful farm in Pauls Valley and also acquired land further south, which he rented out as pasture to local ranchers. During the Depression, he lost quite a bit but was still able to retain 1700 acres. He passed away in 1940, at the age of 85, just as World War II was beginning in Europe.

Hector Derdeyn was a remarkable man: creative, imaginative, clever, and bold. His children all grew to be similarly dynamic figures, well educated, with strong personalities. Three became professional musicians (an operatic singer, a violinist, and a cellist), two were engineers (one military, one agricultural), and two were university professors. Only Albert Derdeyn remained in Belgium; the rest lived in various parts of the United States. Hector Derdeyn always remained an important figure in the mind of his youngest child, Frieda.

[[](http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/C/Joyce.K.Coleman-1/image005.jpg)](http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/C/Joyce.K.Coleman-1/image005.jpg)Like many immigrants to America, Frieda had to learn English as a second language. She proved an excellent student, displaying a gift for languages that would serve her well in her adult life. The knowledge of French she brought with her from Belgium would become the basis of her professional life. In the early 1920s Frieda attended "finishing school" at Ward-Belmont School for Women in Nashville, Tennessee (now Belmont University). A scrapbook remains, documenting her experiences there; carefully maintained and meticulously organized, it contains a fascinating collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, recital and theatre programs, and friends' autographs and toasts. Pictures reveal Frieda as a petite, dark-haired young woman with warm brown eyes, a pale moon-shaped face, and a girlish smile. Her scrapbook suggests that she was well liked, athletic, and a talented piano player.  She continued to keep journals and records of her experiences throughout her life.  
 In 1931 Frieda earned a B.A. in English at the University of Oklahoma and in 1934 an M.A. in French at the University of Pittsburgh. She spent 1934-35 teaching English in Belgium and 1935-36 teaching English in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In 1937, in order to be nearer to her mother and father, who still lived on the family farm in Pauls Valley, she accepted a position as assistant professor of French at the Oklahoma College for Women in Chickasha.

Frieda continued to teach French and various other courses at OCW until 1942. She might have stayed longer, but in the fall of 1941, a new English instructor arrived. It didn't take long for the pretty, petite French teacher to catch the eye of Rudolph Bambas. By the end of the spring semester, Frieda and Rudolph were making wedding plans. But who was this young man and where did he come from? Who was Rudolph Bambas?

Rudolph Bambas was born in Chicago on June 15, 1915, the son of an Austrian tailor and a German housewife. We do not have as much information about Rudolph's early life or his family as we do for Frieda; he was not nearly the archivist she was. However, the records which are extant state that he grew up in Chicago and studied at Wabash University, at that time a small liberal arts college for men which offered a classical education. He pursued his M.A. and Ph.D. at Northwestern University, most likely in order to be close to his parents, who still lived in Chicago. Although Rudolph's graduate studies focused on medieval literature, languages, and philology, his dissertation concerned a book written in 1618; its title was *The Verb in Samuel Daniels' The Collection of the History of England.* Rudolph graduated in 1941 and in the fall of that year began teaching English classes at the Oklahoma College for Women in Chickasha.

During the fall semester of 1941, Rudolph and Frieda got to know one another, discovering their mutual love of languages and literature. They learned Spanish together, Frieda taught Rudolph some rudimentary French, Rudolph bested Frieda in countless chess games, and they spent long hours talking and reading to each other. It was a charming time for both of them, but their growing affection for each other could hardly go unnoticed. In the South in the early 1940s, it was not acceptable for faculty to begin romantic relationships, even less so at women's colleges. Ultimately, Frieda and Rudolph were told their jobs would terminate with the academic year, that is, at the end of spring 1942.

Another complication arrived on December 7, 1941, when news came of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. On December 8, President Roosevelt declared war on Japan and three days later, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. By the beginning of summer 1942, Rudolph had returned to Chicago. The two lovers faced the dismal realization that Rudolph would no doubt be called in by the local draft board. By letter and telegram, they planned a quick marriage. Frieda took a train up to Chicago and they were married on June 18, 1942, Rudolph's twenty-seventh birthday. Frieda, who was 37 at the time, recorded her age as 27 on her wedding certificate. The happy couple had a brief 17 days together in Chicago before Rudolph had to depart for basic training.

This juncture begins a time of frequent and steady correspondence, lasting from 1942 to 1946. Unfortunately, only Rudolph's letters have been preserved. Nonetheless, these letters provide a wealth of information not only about the couple's personal lives but also about the experiences of an American soldier during World War II, and to a lesser degree, those of the wife waiting for him Stateside.

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As Rudolph settled into basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Frieda traveled on to visit her oldest sister, Marie Sylvie, in Pittsburgh. Then she returned to Pauls Valley to be with her mother. She apparently asked Rudolph to address his letters to "Miss Frieda Derdeyn" rather than "Mrs. R. C. Bambas." Although her family knew about the wedding, she didn't want the news to spread more widely, as she feared it would hurt her chances of finding another teaching job. At the time a married woman was expected to spend her time making a comfortable home; the couple was supposed to rely primarily upon the husband's income, even if he were a soldier. If a woman had a job, the expectation was that she was earning pin money, not paying bills. This cultural perspective was shared to some extent by Rudolph. He often urged Frieda not to worry too much about finding a job, since his income could provide for them both. However, he never explicitly discouraged her from seeking a job, and often praised her for her cleverness and thrift:

As you say, it wouldn't be nice to keep our marriage secret, but if you think it wise to protect your job-chances in these perilous times, perhaps we ought to consider it. I wouldn't worry too much about a job, though. I think I'll be able to take reasonably good care of you even if I'm thrown into the Army. (June 9, 1942, written before he was officially drafted)

In September 1942, Frieda began teaching again at Oklahoma College for Women. But the appointment was only for one semester; in the spring, she sought new employment. Meanwhile, Rudolph divided his spare time between writing letters to Frieda, reading Shakespeare in the Officers Club, and composing love poems for his wife. He was very anxious for the war to be over soon and hoped to obtain a commission and a steady Stateside desk job in administration or as an instructor in one of the training facilities. He also applied for a position in Intelligence. He hoped that his Ph.D would help keep him away from the front lines. During his training at Fort Bragg, he sent Frieda a poem which he had composed for her:  
  
*Qui aime est immortel* [Who loves is immortal]  
  
    Now all about me laddies stand  
    Who stand up straight and brave  
    Tomorrow they will bloodied die  
        And molder in the grave.  
  
    They wonder as they look at me  
    If I am bound to die,  
    To stand up straight beside them briefly  
        And long beside them lie.  
      
    But when the last has laid him down  
    I'll still stand straight, and strong.  
    My girl will greet me with her eyes  
        And I shall hold her long.  
  
    Ah, luckless lads, I should be shamed  
    To stand yet when you lie.  
    But a woman keeps me in her heart,  
        And so I cannot die.  
  
The speaker of the poem seems to be on a battlefield, yet Rudolph was never involved in either battle or campaign. The poem speaks to his fears and to his idealized, romantic concept of love. In July he had written:

It is less than twenty-four hours since last I saw my Beautiful Precious, and already there is such an ache in my heart. I just can't live without my Baby. She is so close to me, so very much a part of me. This enforced separation is a terrible aspect of the war. "C'est la guerre" with a vengeance. But every tick of the clock brings the armistice and demobilization nearer. Honey, I'm a hell of a soldier, verdad, no? I've been in the army for only a few weeks and all I think of is demobilization. (July 27, 1942)

 Like many other young men and women of their generation, Rudolph and Frieda experienced a wartime invasion within the borders of their own private lives.

In mid-December 1942, Rudolph was transferred to a Field Artillery school in Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma. He was overjoyed, as this brought him within a bus ride of Frieda. In early March 1943, he was promoted to lieutenant and sent to New Orleans, where Frieda joined him. For the first time since the third week of their marriage, they were able to live together. They made many happy memories together in New Orleans that summer, knowing that in August Rudolph's training would be over and he would be sent off again.

When the time came, Rudolph was not allowed to tell Frieda where he was going or where he was when he got there; all correspondence was censored. This was a harrowing time for him and for Frieda, because of the great uncertainty which hung over their lives. Apparently he travelled in the States for a short period of time--once he mentions being in California. Meanwhile, Frieda had returned to her mother's house in Pauls Valley and had applied for a position at Ward-Belmont College for Women in Nashville, where she had completed her own studies twenty years earlier. Her letters were sent to the 35th Reply Bin of the Postmaster of New York, which forwarded her mail to Rudolph's precise location. In early September, Frieda accepted a position as head of the French Department at Ward-Belmont. It was a small, charming school for women, and probably held many sweet and pleasant memories from her own experiences there as an undergraduate. She continued teaching there until May 1945, returning to Pauls Valley to visit her mother during the holidays.

On September 8, 1943, Rudolph sent a letter telling Frieda that he was then traveling by ship, bound for an unknown destination. That same day, Italy surrendered. Rudolph's letters from shipboard expressed his hope that the war would soon be coming to a close. He assured his wife that he had plenty of reading material as well as a pocket chess set which she had given him for his birthday. Thus far, he claimed, he was undefeated. His letters were full of reminiscences about their summer together in New Orleans. On September 15, he sent a sonnet in celebration of fifteen months of married life:  
  
     *Like Me, Ulysses*  
  
    Like me, Ulysses sallied out to war,  
    An alien wanderer, and far from home.  
    And twice ten years he dwelt away before  
    He came to cleave unto his mate and roam  
    No more. He found Penelope had kept  
    Love always shining in her eyes for him,  
    Through years forever lost had sometimes slept  
    With tears hard winking at the eyelid's brim.  
    For us the ritual moon cannot grow wan  
    Unshared as often as for them, love's rites  
    Grow cold in memory, as time wears on.  
    Ours not to inherit their years of empty nights,  
    For I am no sad, dogged, luckless he,  
    Nor you so patient as Penelope.  
  
On October 18, 1943, after 40 days at sea, Rudolph was able to write: "We're safely landed in India." A packet of mail was waiting for him from Frieda, which he eagerly read.  
    Initially, Rudolph spent time at a British camp and enjoyed an officer's life, British-style. Each officer had his own bearer, a young Indian who waited on them, brought them tea and meals, and tidied up after them. Rudolph's letters from this time are full of anecdotes about Indian culture and daily life: shopping, bazaars, and visiting nearby towns. Rudolph decided to learn Hindustani from his bearer, Annam. He instructed Annam to speak to him only in Hindustani, and bought a grammar in a local bookshop. When his battalion began traveling, in November, he couldn't reveal their destination; his letters give merely a few details of landscape and mention encountering speakers of Pushtu, Tamil, Punjabi, and other languages.   
    On December 3, 1943, Rudolph arrived at his permanent post in India. Based on a careful reading of the letters, this was probably somewhere near Calcutta. He continued learning Hindustani, and within a month and a half, began teaching it to the enlisted men and officers, offering four classes a day, five days a week. He also began learning more about Indian culture and history from a tutor he had hired, an Indian man he refers to as "Nathaniel the Baptist." Within a short time Rudolph was also giving lectures on Indian history and modern Indian culture and politics to newly arrived soldiers. This constituted the main portion of his work for some time in India, although he also served on occasion as paymaster, inventory officer in the Post Exchange, and censor (he read the French, German, Spanish, and Italian mail). His leisure time he spent with the other officers playing basketball, badminton, volleyball, baseball, softball, ping-pong, and golf. He bought books when they were available, read Shakespeare voraciously, and continued his studies of Hindustani and French. Rudolph also enjoyed shopping at the bazaars for gifts for Frieda and her mother, for his own mother, and for friends back home. He sent Frieda silver bracelets, a silver belt, a little red jacket of Kashmir silk, and a blue sari with white trim accompanied by a little sari-wearing doll, to demonstrate how the garment was worn. Rudolph wrote often, almost every day, not merely to Frieda but also to family and friends.  
    The letters he wrote to Frieda during this time are marked by boredom, the feeling of cultural isolation, and the loneliness of being on the other side of the world from his wife. He felt as far away from the war, he said, as if he had been in Oklahoma. The letters are full of recollections of the few but sweet moments he had had with Frieda. But the letters and packages took a long time to travel between the States and India, and often the couple would write to each other for weeks without knowing whether the other had received and replied to previous mail. Gradually, strains began to develop.

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    Back in Tennessee, Frieda was still teaching French at Ward-Belmont. Rudolph's responses to her letters reveal that she often complained of being overworked and that her eyes were strained by the many papers she graded. She did not enjoy housework and did not know how to cook, and she fretted about her health. Before his stint in India, Rudolph had always commiserated with Frieda, urging her to rest her eyes, take on assistants, take care of herself, etc. But his long absence, the time lapse between letters, the cultural differences, and various other wartime annoyances began to take some of the passion out of their love affair.  
    During the spring and early summer of 1944, both Rudolph and Frieda began to wonder if the other's feelings were changing. They questioned each other, seeking assurance about a future neither one of them could foresee. In letter after letter, Frieda probed Rudolph about a possible promotion. Was she feeling the economic strain, or did she just want to know that he was rising through the ranks, making her proud to be his wife? In any case, the continual pressure finally bring Rudolph to a point of resolution:

You know, I would be much pleased if you would no longer imply now and then that it is my fault for not getting promoted. Please believe me, the army is different no amount of initiative, aggressiveness, and apple-polishing could possibly get anybody promoted in the army now. Let's resign ourselves to the little gold bar and forget about it. If I were a military careerist, it would matter, but I'm not and it doesn't.

At another point, Frieda's unhappiness in her teaching workload became a sore-point. Where Rudolph had been tender and encouraging for months, he now addressed the matter as a problem to be solved:

So write me soon that you have reformed and are much happier. If you can't work out a compromise between your work and your health and happiness, then quit the job and either find something easier or just loaf. The simplest thing to do at the moment is undoubtedly just to lighten your work by doing less in the paper-grading line. Will do? Please, for both our sakes!

    Income tax was another headache for Frieda, and thus for Rudolph. In April 1944, she wrote criticizing him for being reticient about money matters and secretive about his income. He replied with a five-page explanation of his last year's income and instructions about the income tax. Here as in other instances, a few conversations could probably have cleared up the difficulty, but the lag-time in correspondence aggravated the tensions of their long separation.  
    Frieda had to go on with her life back home, balanced between several futures. If Rudolph came home, they could try to take up where they had left off, and she would have the freedom either to stay at home or to return to work. If Rudolph did not come back, she would have to make her own way with whatever skills she had. Alternatively, she might want to follow the example of those women who were ending their hastily contracted pre-war marriages and marrying someone else. In other words, the Bambases shared the dilemmas that confront many wartime marriages, when one spouse is serving overseas.

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As things worked out, Rudolph returned to Frieda at war's end, in 1945. The letters ceased, and with them our detailed knowledge of their experiences and emotions. What the records show is that after his military discharge, Rudolph taught for one year at the University of Missouri, then took up a job at the University of Oklahoma, where he remained until retirement. He taught Old and Middle English, and Old and Middle High German, literature and language, introducing his students to epics such as Beowulf, the Niebelungenlied, and Parzifal. He also occasionally offered classes in Old Norse and worked with the Poetic Edda, among other works. Though his philological talents may have initially intimidated some students, and colleagues, they soon found that he was a charming, graceful speaker, equipped to discuss etymologies, metrics, historical points of fact, literature, and all manner of questions relevant to the classroom.  
    After Rudolph's return, Frieda taught French at the University of Oklahoma from 1946 until 1951. She seems to have spent a year or two then studying in Paris, since in 1953 she earned a Certificat, avec mention tres honorable from the Institut de Phonetique of the University of Paris. Next she travelled to Vermont to study at the French School in Middlebury, Vermont, where she earned her second Master's degree in 1954. She then returned to the University of Oklahoma, where she again taught as an instructor from 1956 to 1957.  
    In 1957 Rudolph was promoted to the rank of full professor. His research on the history of the English language culminated in the publication of The English Language: Its Origin and History (University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). Within a year, a paperback edition of the work appeared in Japan, edited with notes by Eiichi Suzuki and Shuji Sato (The Origin & History of the English Language, Kinseido, 1981). Rudolph also published a scholarly article, "Another View of the Old English Wife's Lament (Journal of English and Germanic Philology 62 (1963): 303-9). He devoted much of his energy to teaching, and enjoyed playing golf or chess when not studying.   
    Between 1960 and 1963, Frieda taught French at Midwest City High School, and from 1963 to 1969 she served as an assistant professor of French at Central State College in Edmond, Oklahoma. During the late 1960s she began working on her own Ph.D. in Teacher Education at the University of Oklahoma, completing it in 1970, at the age of 65. Her dissertation was entitled "An Evaluation of the Benefits Derived by Oklahoma Teachers of Modern Foreign Language from Participation in NDEA Foreign Language Institutes."   
    In spring 1985, Rudolph retired after 39 years of teaching. He was 70. In a newspaper article of that year, Rudolph spoke of plans to write up some stories of his time in India. His friend and colleague in OU's English department, Professor James Yoch, had heard and admired these stories during many shared lunches, and was encouraging Rudolph to preserve them in writing. But Rudolph's health was failing, and only one unpublished story ("Maq Bul and the Hindustani Sahib") has emerged from his later years before his death on August 8, 1996, at the age of 81.

    In her last years Frieda donated money to establish scholarships and professorships at various universities, in memory of people she had known and loved. Because she and her siblings suffered from age-related macular degeneration, her last endowment set up the Dr. Frieda Bambas Professorship in Ophthalmology at the Wilmer Eye Institute of Johns Hopkins University. She died at the age of 100 in September 2005, survived by her nephew Conrad J. Derdeyn of Austin, Texas; Andri P. Derdeyn of Virginia; and Christian van Dyck of Belgium.  
  
Among the Derdeyn/Bambas papers is a plaque conferring the title of Professor Emeritus of English on Rudolph. Inscribed below the announcement of the award is perhaps the most famous two lines of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,

mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlađ

Spirit shall be harder, heart the keener,

Courage schall be greater, as our strength lessens