Excerpted from: To Life *36 Stories of Memory and Hope,* Bulfinch Press, 2002

JERRY AND REGINA PETERS
A Story from the Lodz Ghetto

There were elegant four-tiered candlesticks on the table in front of them in January 1944, in the Lodz ghetto. Friends and relatives gathered. The men wore skullcaps, the women hats, and there were even smiles on the guests' faces. Of course, on such an occasion, everyone seemed a little stiff and nervous. For a wonderful ceremony – the marriage of Juda Putersznyt and Rywka Cala -- was about to take place.

Despite accelerating brutality all around the incarcerated Jewish population, such assertions of human dignity, hope, and meaning through ritual and celebration were a form of resistance and a key to survival in the Lodz ghetto, and elsewhere during the Holocaust. Chaim Rumkowski, the head of the Jewish Council gave Putersznyt a ring, so Juda could place it on the hand of Rywka his bride.

In March 1939 Juda Putersznyt had been a young soldier in the Polish Army. When his unit was captured by the Germans, he was imprisoned and spent some time in a prisoner of war camp. Because he was a Jew, he was stripped of his military status, uniform, and papers, and given a pass to return to Lodz where he had been born.

When he returned, in April 1940, he discovered that the Germans had appropriated the family's venetian blind factory. They had herded all the family members, as with all Lodz's Jews, into the ghetto, which was set up in a slum quarter of the city. Here approximately 164,000 people were crammed, increasing the density of the zone seven fold, in flimsy wooden houses with virtually no running water or sewers.

The Nazis immediately expropriated all Jewish property and factories, including the one owned by the Putersznyt family. The factories were re-fitted to serve the German army and civilian population.

The Jewish Council, or Judenrat, set up by the Nazis to coordinate internal ghetto affairs and the production of useful goods for the Nazis, organized the Putersznyt family's factory to produce wooden beds and toys for German children. With his knowledge of machinery and woodworking – from having learned the business from his father Israel – Juda Putersznyt became foreman of the factory. It was one of 96 factories employing tens of thousands of skilled, Jewish forced labor. The Jewish population's productivity was the primary reason the Nazis kept the ghetto population alive in Lodz. The leadership of the Judenrat, headed by Chaim Rumkowski, felt the only hope of saving some remnant of Jews from destruction was to keep the entire ghetto functioning as productively as possible.

For five years, Putersznyt worked in the factory, ten-hour days, with starvation rations that grew more meager as the war went on. The Nazis periodically entered the ghetto and removed the children, the elderly, the weak, and the many who had grown sick from malnutrition and the increasingly appalling conditions.

Over 20% of the population died in the ghetto from starvation, cold, and disease. Periodic deportations to Chelmno and other death camps also depleted the population. Because the ghetto was isolated not only from the world but also from other ghettos and even the Polish underground, the deported Jews did not have a clear idea of where they were being taken. Shortly after arrival at Chelmno, 47 miles west of Lodz, they were told they were being prepared to work in Germany, but they were to be gassed to death in specially equipped vans.

In spring 1944 the Soviet army reached the Vistula River, about seventy miles from Lodz. The Germans determined to eliminate all the Jews who remained alive in Lodz--approximately 70,000 people. Among these were the most valued and skilled workers, such as Juda Putersznyt, his father, brother, and others workers whom they had managed to train. Among these was Rywka Cala, who had come to work in the same factory.

By the fall of 1944, when the Russians began their final advance toward Lodz, almost all of the Jews who had been alive in the spring had already been transported to Auschwitz where many were killed. Juda and Rywka Putersznyt were among a detachment of some 800 Jews whom the Nazis planned to murder last. They were left behind to pack the belongings of the deported Jews. As the Soviet guns were heard in the distance, an average of forty to sixty freight cars a day left the Lodz ghetto, loaded with furniture and other personal possessions of every kind-- all the Jewish community's property and all usable factory machines.

The ghetto's few remaining survivors now desperately hid from the Nazis. Even with the Soviets only a few kilometers away, the Nazis still went methodically from house to house through the ghetto to uncover the last survivors from their bunkers and hideouts in order to shoot them on the spot.

Rywka Putersznyt, Juda Putersznyt, his father, and twenty-one others fashioned a large hidden closet within a closet. After three days, without moving, without food or water, they heard a family friend, who had been hiding in another bunker, shout, "Putersznyt, we are free. The Russians are here!"

On January 19, 1945, the three Putersznyts returned to their home and factory. Here, no longer pursued and hunted, they were eventually able to re-establish their lives for several years before emigrating to Canada and then the United States. Because that first night of liberation was

also a Friday night, Juda and Rywka Putersznyt lit candles and said the traditional blessings to welcome the Sabbath Bride, and to celebrate their freedom.

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BAMBERGER FAMILY

"I can still hear the loud rap at the front door…"

As Joseph Bamberger remembered it, there was at first a loud stomping of heavy leather boots on the wooden floor in the hallway of the family's apartment building. It was a menacing, echoing sound that grew suddenly nearer. Then loud, insistent rapping on their door.

"Who is it?" ten-year-old Joseph's mother asked. "Who's there?"

It was November 9, 1938, at the home of Seligmann and Else Bamberger and their children Hannah and Joseph, in Hamburg, Germany. None of them forgot that night, called *Kristallnacht*, Crystal Night, for the shards of broken glass from hundreds of stores, homes, and venerable synagogues attacked, looted, destroyed, and burned. It was the first large-scale organized physical attack on the Jewish community by the Nazi hierarchy all across Germany and Austria.

"Gestapo," came the reply. "Open up."

Two uniformed men barged in and began to search each room, closet, and cupboard. Yet the person they sought was not there. Seligmann Bamberger, graduate of Heidelberg University, teacher of chemistry and physics at the Jewish Carolienenstrasse school and devoted leader of his synagogue, had been warned. He was at that moment evading the mobs and making his way through the threatening streets to his synagogue on the Bornplatz. His mission: to rescue the objects at the very heart of the Jewish community's life, the Torah scrolls. He entered the darkened synagogue and, hoping the scrolls were still there, he opened the ark that held them. . .

For days after *Kristallnacht* Bamberger and the other community leaders hid to avoid arrest. Not all succeeded: more than 30,000 Jewish men and boys throughout Germany were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Although an anti-Jewish atmosphere had prevailed in the previous weeks, nothing on this scale had ever occurred before. Personal and community objects of all kinds – household articles, works of art, religious objects-- were looted or destroyed.

Bamberger was able to return home a week later. Yet the message was as clear as the crystal: The Nazis had gotten away with their first large-scale anti-Jewish violence.

In the ensuing months, even while new anti-Jewish edicts were promulgated and enforced, Bamberger continued to teach science and to participate in Jewish cultural life. The family was also working strenuously to obtain visas to the United States. However, the restrictive American immigration quotas were already long filled. To obtain four non-quota visas, Bamberger needed intervention and help in the United States. Fortunately, one of his closest friends, Edgar Frank, had emigrated with his family shortly before *Kristallnacht.* For a year and a half he persevered, obtaining the endorsement of Congressman Sol Bloom of New York, and even of Albert Einstein, who had himself immigrated to the United States in 1933. Finally, when Yeshiva College in New York invited Bamberger to join its department of chemistry, the family was offered four precious United States visas. His students made Bamberger a personalized Hanukkah booklet as a going away gift.

When they sailed from Italy in March 1940 on the *SS Washington,* they knew that with Europe already at war, and almost all doors now closed to Jews, they were among the lucky ones. Nearly all family and friends left behind perished.

Joseph remembered: “The most important item in our suitcases was a Torah scroll . . . one of the Torah scrolls that my father had rescued from the Bornplatz Synagogue on Kristallnacht.”

With this they re-established their religious and personal lives, first in Washington Heights, the northern part of Manhattan where many German Jewish immigrants settled, and then on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Joseph grew up and married Edgar Frank’s youngest daughter, Dorothy, and settled in Patchogue, Long Island, to raise their family. The Torah scroll was actively in use in their community synagogues.

The Torah has found a new home as part of the permanent Kristallnacht exhibit at the Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in Battery Park City, where it now has a new use. It tells the story of how Seligmann Bamberger risked his life to save the Torah scroll, and how the Torah saved his life.