

INTERVIEW WITH ELLIS CORETS
NANCY BLASE, INTERVIEWER
JUNE 25, 2015

NB: This is Nancy Blase conducting an interview for the Washington State Jewish Historical Society of Ellis Corets in Bellevue, Washington on June 25, 2015. Mr. Corets, thank you very much for taking the time for this Oral History. Much of our focus will be on the founding of Ner Tamid and your American Jewish War Heroes Yahrzeit program. But first let's start with some information about you. Would you please pronounce and spell your name, where you were born plus the year and how old you are?

EC: Ellis Corets E-l-l-i-s, the usual spelling, Corets C-o-r-e-t-s. I was born in the Bronx in New York City in 1931 and I came to Seattle, the Bellevue area, in 1962.

NB: Would you please provide your father's name and where each of your parents grew up and moved to?

EC: My father's name was Mark and he was born in Boston, grew up in Boston, And my mother was born in Troy, New York, and she grew up there and they both eventually came to New York City and lived in New York City.

NB: And you grew up in New York City, correct?

EC: Yes I did.

NB: What was it like being Jewish where you lived?

EC: Actually not very pleasant. I grew up in a community which was essentially non-Jewish. In the elementary school I went to we had two classes of 30 in my grade. I was the only Jewish kid in the classes. It was a time of heightened anti-Semitism and in the mid-1930s Germany was going downhill with the Nazis and there was a very large brown shirt movement in the States. There was a German American club in our community which on its walls would post anti-Semitic expressions. My father on different occasions went and tore some of those posters down. The environment for Jews really changed in 1948 when Israel was created because then, almost without a defense, when we saw how strong Israel turned out to be, there was a lot less overt anti-Semitism, at least from my point of view.

NB: Very interesting. And where did you meet your wife?

EC: Well I had belonged to B'nai B'rith, the AZA as a kid, and then the B'nai B'rith Young Adults. And we had a picnic at Pallow Bay Park in the Bronx and I met Bobbie at the picnic and, it was a very interesting, at least to me, occasion. Cause when I asked Bobbie for her telephone number and she gave it to me I wrote it down in my address book, I used a pen. And she says "Oh that must be permanent." And it turned out to be that it was permanent.

NB: Well, you mentioned that you came to Washington State in 1962. Can you give some of the background on coming here?

EC: Well I had been on the west coast when I was in the service and there was a desire to come back to the west coast. And when I had finished my engineering degree I was a night student, and was working for a company in New York I decided that I didn't like where I was going with that company and I wanted to get back to the west coast. I had a friend who had graduated with me and had come to work for Boeing and I requested that he send me an application. He did so and I returned that application, put it in the mail on Monday morning and at 2:30 Wednesday of the same week my wife called me at work and said "You got a telegram here from Boeing Company offering you a job." When I got home at 6:00 I called Mark Youngquist at Boeing at 6:15. I accepted the position at 25 minutes to 7. Came here in 1962.

NB: And was that around the time of the World's Fair?

EC: Well actually I came here about two or three weeks before the Fair started and at the time our family consisted of Elaine was a little over 2 years old, and Eva who was 6 weeks old. My coming to Boeing was contingent upon her being 6 weeks old.

NB: Did you drive across the country?

EC: Oh no, we flew.

NB: Did you join a synagogue when you first arrived or shortly after?

EC: Yeah, shortly after I joined Herzl primarily to have a place to go to for the High Holy Days and I was a member of Herzl from 1962 until 1965.

NB: Thank you. Would you please describe the founding of Ner Tamid, how it all happened?

EC: In the early 1960s, Bellevue and the Eastside was quite different than it is today. The 520 bridge was under construction. That opened in about 1964. There was no 405, we used to commute to Boeing on the old Lake Washington Boulevard, one lane in each direction with no grade separation. In Seattle the tallest building was the Smith Tower, the tallest building north of San Francisco. There was no I-5. The traffic reports in the morning would describe traffic tie-ups on Aurora. There was no I-90. At the time it was a state highway, two lanes in each direction with a reversible middle lane during rush hours, which made it quite dangerous. They had an infamous bulge in the middle. So the Bellevue community was somewhat of an isolated community. There was two families who donated a building, a former church, the Glazers and the Wildners, and we used to have, Herzl had Friday evening services once a month in that building. And in 1964 we started a Sunday School so that we had limited access to Jewish community, Jewish education, Jewish services and such. And at the conclusion of that Sunday School year, three other men and myself, Morrie Beckenstein, Jerry Birch, Julie Skolnick, all of blessed memory, and myself met in the kitchen of Morrie Beckenstein. We described what was needed, what had to be done. and we decided to join and found a synagogue.

So our founding date is May 30, 1965. Within two weeks we had a meeting at Dr. Harold Rosenbaum's house where Jerry, Murray, and Julie and myself are a steering committee to get things going. Now at that meeting Dr. Rosenbaum, when the subject of a name for a congregation came up, suggested Ner Tamid and that name was so well accepted that there wasn't even another name mentioned. So we became Ner Tamid. In another couple of weeks, we had a meeting at the old Puget Sound Power & Light auditorium which was an open meeting. And we had a lot of interest and we had our first service just a couple weeks later at Crossroads; there used to be a theater there, and we had our first service in that theater.

NB: And just to get the geography of Herzl and Ner Tamid, so Herzl was on Mercer Island, is that correct.

EC: No. No. Herzl was in the Central District. Actually it was an area that like so many cities was on a down spiral. And it was getting dangerous to be there after dark and such. It was really a difficult commute coming from the Eastside. Herzl knew that they were short timers at that location.

NB: Do you happen to remember any of the streets near there?

EC: I remember something like Cherry Street or something like that.

NB: Oh yeah. A Jewish population was there.

EC: And then of course Ner Tamid was in Bellevue.

NB: Thank you. And so your new synagogue began and grew and did you rent or construct a building?

EC: Well we didn't have to do much renting. There was a fellow named Abby Label who owned a motel in the Eastgate area. And we used to have Friday night services in his dining hall. And then eventually we bought a building which was a former church, in Lake Hills, and it was a church that was really convenient for ourselves at the time. We were a long way from raising money to build our own building and it really got us going as far as having a regular place for worship. When we decided to go ahead with the synagogue, there's a couple of things that we recognized we needed. A synagogue has to be a place of study, a place of worship, and a place of assembly. And actually that is the priority of those building, you want a building that sequence. And also to be able to provide services for the members. You want to be able to have an organization such that when a minyan is needed to be able to provide that minyan at a moment's notice, so that, we were able to do that.

NB: And did you hire a rabbi or a chazzan?

EC: We hired a rabbi, we had visiting cantors, but Rabbi Cohen was the rabbi we hired.

NB: How about the Torahs? Where did they come from?

- EC: Actually we had two Torahs which were both donated by members.
- NB: They had them at home or?
- EC: No. No, they went out and made a purchase.
- NB: That's good. And what kind of programs did you have there? Sisterhood, Men's Club, committees, Sunday School?
- EC: Yes. Yes, yes, yes and yes. Adult education, men's group, Sisterhood. We had many, many different activities. We had auctions and socials and bridge tournaments and a full range of activities that you would expect to see in a young vibrant synagogue.
- NB: And you've shown me many years' worth of newsletters. So it was quite active.
- EC: From the beginning we published a newsletter every month called *Highlights*. And being the collector that I am I collected every piece of paper that I've ever seen that was involved with Ner Tamid, which included tickets, membership cards, auction highlights. Any time there was ever an article in the local newspaper, I tried to assemble and collect every one of those and I have, there are two books involved. I have about 7 inches of history.
- NB: Wonderful! What led to Ner Tamid's merging with Herzl? When was that and where was Herzl at the time?
- EC: Well, Herzl had its problems and we had our problems. Herzl was in a neighborhood where people did not want to go to, they needed a new building, they needed a new atmosphere. And it was the 1970 time period where the economy in Seattle was terrible. And Ner Tamid had its financial problems. And we came together with merger discussions and some of those were not easy, but we toughed it out and we agreed to merge. There were several different site locations that were being considered for a new synagogue. And the one that was ultimately sought was the site on Mercer Island where we merged the congregation and we built a school and then we built a synagogue. And that's what you see today.
- NB: And I think I read somewhere there was a third congregation involved in some of your early discussions, Beth Shalom?
- EC: Well, apparently they were and they decided they did not want to be a part of the merger. And when we merged there were members of each congregation that decided they did not want to be in the merged congregation for some of the reasons why we formed Ner Tamid in the first place. Some of us did not want to go back and be part of Herzl. And that's the reality and that was unfortunate.
- NB: So some of them went to Beth Shalom, another conservative congregation.
- EC: Yes or elsewhere.

NB: And what year was this merger that happened?

EC: 1970.

VB: Would you please describe the recent 50th Anniversary celebration and whether many former members returned for that, any of the people who organized it? Anything you want to say about the—

EC: Well, I realized a couple years ago after Herzl had had its 100th Anniversary that Ner Tamid was coming up on its 50th Anniversary. So I went before the board a couple years ago and brought up the subject of an anniversary celebration, and I had with me my heavy leather bag, with my very, very heavy volumes, to say anything you want to know about Ner Tamid, it's here. Well, the board thought it was a good idea, needed somebody to head up the committee. My daughter Marilyn headed up the committee and she used these books as references and it was a real easy way to identify those people who are members or those members who had children or grandchildren since then, and was able to put together a group, a very, very compatible group that worked on the different aspects of the merger. Marilyn, in order to have something of a memory item for a merger used the Ner Tamid logo that my wife Roberta had designed and she had, Marilyn made up pins that were handed out to all who attended, plus pins were mailed to people who could not attend or for some reason were out of town or whatever, so everyone got a lasting memento of the anniversary celebration. It was very well attended. We had a service, where actually Marilyn delivered the sermon describing Ner Tamid and how it fit in with the current week's Torah portion. And then after the service we had lunch for all in attendance and some of us sponsored that lunch and sponsored the day and it was a day that just was very, very well attended and everyone had a real good feeling about what had been done. Marilyn did a great job with her committee and I couldn't have been happier.

NB: Well, what a nice conclusion to the 50 years of, first the five years of the congregation and then coming back 45 years after the merger with Herzl. That's great. Now let's switch gears to your more recent major accomplishment. Would you please provide the background for the unique program you created related to veterans? Please describe it including the timeframe of when and how you got the idea, the sequence of how it came to be and what the final product or products are.

EC: When I was attending services, after Bobbie had passed away to say Kaddish, the Rabbi would recite all of those who had yahrzeit that week. And I heard those names like I never heard them before. And I realized that some of those names being mentioned have been mentioned every year for 100 years. And it was a realization that I had that a synagogue is not only a place of study, a place of worship, a place of assembly, it's also a place of remembrance. A month later, it was the weekend of Veteran's Day. And Rabbi Rosenbaum asked Veterans in the congregation to stand and to be acknowledged. And as I stood my thoughts were of those who did not come back. They were saying Kaddish for a group of names known or had been known to the congregation but who was saying Kaddish for those thousands of fellows who lie overseas? So with that thought in mind I approached Rabbi Rosenbaum and said "Like to hear an idea that I have?" And he was

receptive and I said "How would it be if I came up with a list so that every week we could mention one service person who was either killed in action or missing in action and the remains were not brought home?" He liked the idea. So I thought well it should be easy to do. I'll just call different organizations and get a list. I called the Jewish War Veterans and they had no such list. I called American Jewish Archives and American Jewish Military Historical Society, and I ran out of organizations to call and no list existed. No one had ever made a list of Jewish service personnel who were killed in action, missing in action and their remains were not brought home. Well, I was discussing the problem I had with a friend of mine, Bob Shay, who referred me to a book published by the National Jewish Welfare Board, 1944. And I got a copy of that book and it listed service personnel and indicated some who had been killed. Also Bob mentioned to me the website of the ABMC, the American Battle Monument Commission. If you go to ABMC.gov, you can actually go to one of their sections which shows, if you plug in the name, it will mention whether he or she is buried or memorialized in one of the ABMC cemeteries. So I went through that book and I found that it was one of a series of four books. The first book was published on the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1942; another book on '43, another '44 and the final book in 1946, of which I have three of the four books. I do not have the '43 and I've been searching for that book for two years.

NB: Let me grab one of those, thank you for bringing them here, so that you could give the title into the recording. Because these are all about Jewish Veterans, Jewish military.

EC: The first book, published in 1942, its title was In the Nation's Service.

NB: And was that all Jewish in that one?

EC: It's all Jewish, only talking about Jewish service personnel. The '43 and '44 editions were Fighting for America.

NB: I believe there's a subtitle that has Jewish in it, is that right?

BC: Well it says The Record of the Participation of the Jewish Men and Women in the Armed Forces During 1944. That's the '44 edition. And then the final book, which was a two-volume book, was American Jews in World War II, published in 1946 and one volume was the listing of names; and the second volume was biographies of some of those. By tagging a name, name by name by name, and checking it on the website, I could find if they were buried or memorialized in an overseas cemetery. If the name did not come up on the ABMC website, it was because they were probably brought home. When you had remains of World War II, the next of kin of family had the option of bringing those remains home and having them entombed in a national cemetery; or at their expense in a private cemetery or leaving those remains where they had fallen and be cared for in an overseas cemetery. The ABMC was created in 1923. It was designed, erected, and when I say erected it's not only just putting in gravestones, there's chapels and there's artwork and there's really a phenomenal design in their design and construction. These cemeteries and memorials are maintained. If someone wants to visit and looking for a particular person, they will actually meet you at the gate and they will escort you and

they'll do whatever they can to make you comfortable. In World War I, you have cemeteries that are devoted to World War I; many cemeteries were added after World War II. In Belgium there's Flanders Field. And if you're familiar with the poem, "In Flanders Field the poppies blow, between the crosses row by row," you really have quite an experience in these cemeteries. Most people are familiar with Normandy because every year there's a lot of publicity about people returning to Normandy. But Normandy is just one of 11 American cemeteries in France. They are the American cemeteries which are on land donated by the country to the United States for perpetual care of the remains. In addition to the 11 cemeteries in France, there are two in Italy, three in Belgium, one in the Netherlands, one in Luxembourg, two in Great Britain, one in Tunisia North Africa, one in Manila. There are also monuments at the tip of Manhattan, there's the East Coast Monument. There's a monument in San Francisco. There's one in Hawaii, these are strictly monuments. There are many, many more monuments besides these.

NB: You know this is very interesting to me because I actually didn't know about the American Battle Monuments Commission and how they were maintaining so many cemeteries and other tributes to the people who died, were missing during the war. Very interesting.

EC: If you go to the website ABMC.gov you can see information on every one of the cemeteries and everything about them. And there's a lot of questions and answers. It's really an experience, exploring everything you can find on that website.

NB: So you compiled this very amazing database and I've learned that you've posted it online. I'm going to give the URL so that someone listening to this tape can find it. The URL is <http://ldrv.ms/ldtXk5r>. And it's many, many pages long and growing and looks like it must have taken hundreds of hours. Can you guess how many hours it did take and when did you find the time to do this?

EC: I don't want to guess at how many hours! Much of the work was done past midnight. It cost me many, many hours of sleep. Once starting it's very difficult to stop. I found it to be an extremely emotional experience. These names became friends, they became brothers.

NB: This is really a labor of love, it comes through with the amount of work that you have done. And I really like the JT News article your daughter Marilyn Corets wrote for the Jewish Sound and JT News, the title is "Finding Heroes: Bellevue Veteran Compiles Database of Jewish Military Yahrzeits," that's the title. And it was published May 6 in the Jewish Sound 2014 and May 9 in the JT News, also 2014. And it's going to remain always online at the JewishSound.org for any of our people listening who want to read that good article. Do you have any more goals related to this project?

EC: Well, up to now it's been pretty heavy on World War II. And I did not have any such publication like the National Jewish Welfare Board for World War II, I don't have the equivalent for World War I so it's piecemeal but I'm starting to accumulate some data, I just had 150 names for World War I and I would like to get as many as possible. So this

is not a complete program. It's a work in progress. If I ever complete this one in my lifetime, the one I would like to look at next would be Civil War, because that's not been done yet. And if I can't do it, maybe I can encourage somebody else to do it.

NB: Um hum. You know I wanted to just have us describe the data that's in this database. Can you tell how, what categories somebody could look for information, because you designed it to be available for yahrzeits. So what are the categories and...

EC: Well I have currently five different breakouts. You can do it by name alphabetically. You can do it by secular date, January, February, March in sequence. All those secular dates are converted to a Hebrew date. So you can print out by secular date, or you can print out by Hebrew date. You can print out alphabetical of the people. You can print out by cemetery, they're done alphabetically. You can print out by state, states are alphabetical and within each state the cities are listed alphabetically within that state. Now there will be a new printout when I do my next update where you'll be able to breakout by war, World War I or World War II. And where I don't have print outs is I have rank, branch of service, honors such as decorations and a column for those missing in action.

NB: Right. And I understand there's also biographical information about some of them, is that right? So if somebody gives a yahrzeit about someone, I thought I read that somewhere. Maybe I'm mistaken.

EC: You know there are many stories of different people who accomplished different things. When I prepare the listing for the next month, I will say, well here's a copy of one I recently did. It's Sivan 2 to Sivan 8 which is May 30th, 31st to June 6th, and it was Solomon Sussman who was a second lieutenant in the US Army. He entered the service from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was killed in action May 28, 1944. He received the Purple Heart and the Silver Star and when we say Kaddish for Lieutenant Sussman we say Kaddish for all service personnel killed in action or missing in action and have yahrzeit this week. I prepare one of these for every week of the year.

NB: And your hope is that, let me turn off the tape for a moment.

NB: We are resuming the interview with Ellis Corets and we had been talking about any more goals related to this project. And you were talking about the Civil War as a possibility. And I was asking you also then about yahrzeits and how various congregations might use the information in these to mention about the person, a person whose yahrzeit would be in the coming week. And I was wondering if you, so you had given the categories and you read one of the biographies and I was wondering because it was in the JT News and Jewish Sound, have you been contacted by some other congregations who might do this?

EC: Well, I haven't really had any contact but different congregations might look at this data differently. In Conservative Orthodox congregations they would naturally be looking at the Hebrew date. But I understand in Reform congregations they use the secular date as a yahrzeit date. So that doesn't matter. The data is such that they could use either one and print out accordingly so that if you printout by Hebrew date, then you can see between

any one dates what the week is. You can do exactly the same thing by printing out the secular date. So there's no problem in any congregation however they observe yahrzeit to use this data.

NB: Well I'm actually going to propose it to my congregation because I think this is very worthwhile. And I'm quite impressed with what you've done.

EC: Well it's available to anyone who wants to use it. I don't have any strings attached to it. It's out there for anyone and everyone to use however they can make use of it. I understand the Jewish Genealogical Society of Washington State is interested and is trying to incorporate it into the Jewish Gen website.

NB: Wonderful! That's great. Well both of your accomplishments being one of the founders of Ner Tamid and putting together this very incredible database are quite impressive. I'm so glad to have been able to interview you today and thank you very, very much

EC: Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW