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Summary Information

Name: Rabbi Michael Aaron Robinson

Birthplace: Asheville, North Carolina

Birthdate: December 13, 1924

Parents: Samuel Robinson and Esther Kroman

Siblings: Eva, Emanuel, Leah, Faela, David and Helen (cousin)

Michael's father, Samuel Robinson was born in Belarus. His father came to Galveston, Texas before the Galveston Movement; an uncle brought him (Sam) there after his father had already been living there. He studied engineering at University of Texas and later received his degree in optometry and practiced this profession in Asheville until he was in his early eighties. He was known to have lost white patients due to his insistence on serving blacks who had arrived first. He worked to integrate the black scouting movement within the Daniel Boone Council.

Michael's mother Esther Kroman, moved from Chicago to Asheville with her parents because her father had tuberculosis. Her mother was born in Leeds, England of a confederate family that had moved there during the Civil War, possibly from St. Joseph, Mo. His maternal grandfather died early and his grandmother ran a millinery store. They lived in a boarding house across from the Wolfes' Old Kentucky Home and his mother would walk to school with Thomas Wolfe. The two families were friendly. Esther had two half brothers who ended up having stores—one in Sylva, then Bryson City, NC; the other in Ellijay, Ga.

Esther and Samuel met outside the millinery store on Patton Avenue. They had both been from single parent homes. When they married they wanted to have a large house full of children. They had six plus a niece.

Asheville had a reform and a conservative congregation at the time. The two groups *did* not socialize. The Robinsons attended services at the Reform Temple every Friday evening after which the children might be dropped off at parties. Jewish life in the Temple and in their household was very important. Michael had a classical reform background with little Hebrew, a gentile choir and an organist. When Rabbi Sydney Unger led his first service at the Temple and sang the kiddish in Hebrew, most people did not know what was happening (circa 1942).

There were approximately two hundred Jewish families in all of Asheville at the time and most of Michael's friends were not Jewish. It was the norm to interact on a daily basis with non-Jews. His mother had attended St Genevieve's boarding school; his father's clientele included many blacks. His grandmother and mother went to Christian Scientist

meetings once a week because they were Jewish Scientists. There were also not any predominantly Jewish neighborhoods, though most Jews lived in north Asheville.

Every day after school he worked at Finkelstein's Loan Office and met people who were pawning items, mostly Blacks and country people. Michael was attending NC State when he enlisted in the Navy. He served on a landing ship tanker in the Pacific theater where he maintained the electronics. It was after this experience that he decided to become a Rabbi and a pacifist. After the Navy he returned to Asheville briefly. He left to attend rabbinic school-Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio—and never returned to Asheville to live. He never felt that there was anti-Semitism in the south. His teachers accommodated his holidays and ate at their home during Passover. When he became a Rabbi in the North he was surprised at the amount of anti-Semitism that his congregants had experienced.

During the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's he returned to the South for demonstrations and was arrested on several occasions. He remains an activist and considers himself a Southerner even though he has spent his adult years in New York, Washington State and California. He believes Southern Jews are Jews by virtue of religion rather than culture Jews. For example, in Asheville every Jewish store and office were closed on the holidays and he believed that non-Jews respected the Jews for that. Michael felt more comfortable with Southern Baptists than northern Jews because they shared a common southern culture. People outside the South thought that he was an anomaly and couldn't believe he was both Southern and Jewish.

**Additional facts about Samuel Robinson** from summary in the UNC-A Ramsey Library manuscript collection (the Samuel Robinson papers):

Samuel Robinson (1891-1973) was born in Grodno in 1891 and came to the United States with his family in 1901. He graduated summa cum laude from the University of Texas with a degree in engineering. He worked with fisheries in Texas, in the oil fields in Louisiana and as a surveyor for the Houston harbor.

Samuel was a founding member of the Carolina Mountain Club, a noted local Boy Scout leader for more than 25 years, as well as a member of the national council of the Boy Scouts of America. He worked for the American Forestry Association and the [Asheville] Metropolitan Planning Board.

He performed his own laboratory work in his optometry profession. During the Depression, and at other times, he never turned away patients, making adjustments for payment according to the patient's ability to pay. He strove to raise standards within the optometry profession. He was an active member of Temple Beth Ha Tephila in Asheville for fifty eight years, missing services only when out of town. He had seven children, seventeen grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren at the time of his death on December 22, 1973.

Summary written by Sharon Fahrner and Jan Schochet