

Michael Sherbourne

A Biographic Sketch

Prepared by Louis Rosenblum from interviews with Michael and Muriel Sherbourne, May 1987 and September 1989



Michael Sherbourne was born February 23, 1917 in Southwest London, Fulham, and grew up in East London, just outside of Whitechapel. His father's parents were born in Warsaw and emigrated to England about 1880 where his father was born in 1888. Michael's mother's family were Sefardim: her father's forebears surnamed, Benjamin, came to England with Menashe ben Israel about 1665; her mother's ancestors came from Holland at the beginning of the 19th century.

At 11, Michael attended secondary school on a county council scholarship. On graduation in 1924, without financial resources for higher education, he worked as a clerk at the Royal Arsenal in Woolridge. In 1937, he left his job, joined Hechalutz and spent the next two years on a farm training prior to going to Palestine. Here he met and married Muriel. They left for Palestine September 1939, just before World War II broke out. They joined a training group that was to form a new kibbutz composed of Anglo and Baltic volunteers. (Here they became acquainted with a Estonian Jew, Nehemiah Levanon.) During the war Michael served in the British army and navy. He return to Palestine in 1946. In 1948 he served in the Israeli army infantry. At the end of that year the Sherbournes returned to England so that Muriel, who was serious ill, could be treated.

Michael enrolled in college for a concentrated course in teaching Russian language and literature and graduated in 1952. In 1962, after 3 years of study, he was awarded an advanced degree in East European studies at University of London.

In 1969 Sherbourne began Soviet Jewry activities with phone calls to the USSR — with phone numbers given to him by Colin Schindler — and soon gained excellent spoken Russian fluency. For the next 20 years he was the indefatigable, indispensable Western link to information from refuseniks throughout the USSR.