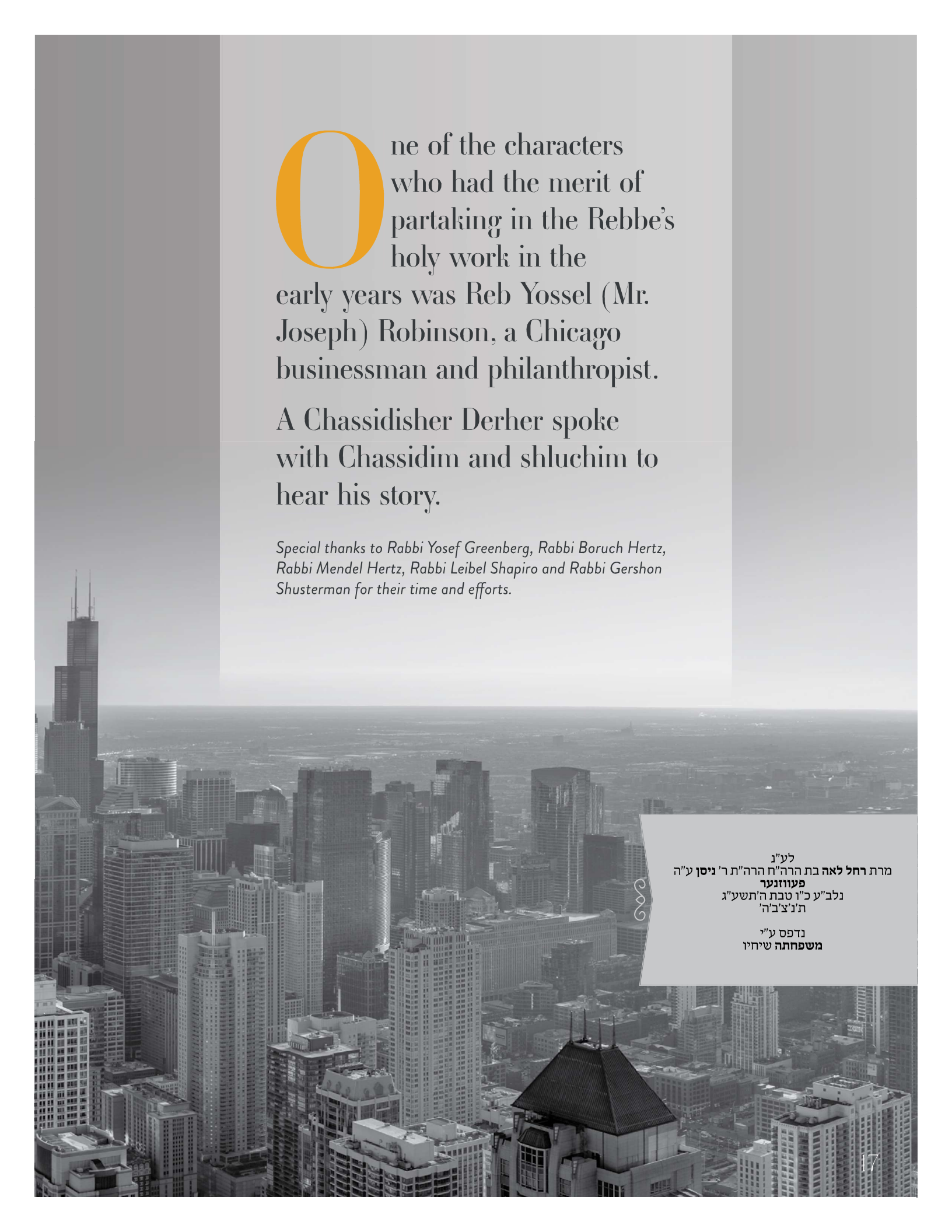
An aerial, black and white photograph of a dense city skyline, likely New York City, featuring numerous skyscrapers and buildings. The image serves as the background for the book cover.

The REBBE'S GVUR

REB YOSSEL ROBINSON



One of the characters who had the merit of partaking in the Rebbe's holy work in the early years was Reb Yossel (Mr. Joseph) Robinson, a Chicago businessman and philanthropist.

A Chassidisher Derher spoke with Chassidim and shluchim to hear his story.

Special thanks to Rabbi Yosef Greenberg, Rabbi Boruch Hertz, Rabbi Mendel Hertz, Rabbi Leibel Shapiro and Rabbi Gershon Shusterman for their time and efforts.

לע"נ
מרת רחל לאה בת הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' ניסן ע"ה
פעוונער
נלב"ע כ"ו טבת ה'תשע"ג
תנ"צ'בה'
נדפס ע"י
משפחתה שיחיו

Officers of West Point

Rabbi Gershon Shusterman relates:

“Early one morning in 5727*, at about seven o’clock, a fellow came in and sat down in the first seat in the *zal*. His appearance was somewhat unique; he wore a suit and an old fashioned yarmulke and at first I thought he might be a *schnorrer*. I asked him if he needed assistance but he said that he did not.

“He proceeded to sit there for two hours, and I didn’t pay too much attention to him. After all, many different personalities would wander through 770.

“At Mincha, Rabbi Mentlick made an announcement: After Maariv at 9:30, there will be an *asifa* (assembly) for all the *bochurim*.

“This was uncommon. I had been learning in the yeshiva for three years, and no *asifa* had ever been held. Needless to say, it piqued our interest. After Maariv, the *zal* was packed with many *bochurim* — I finally discovered how many *bochurim* officially learned in 770...

“Then, Rabbi Mentlick showed up. This was unusual as well. He was a very punctual person; he would return home at the end of *seder nigleh* at seven o’clock and



REB YOSEF ROBINSON AT HIS SON'S WEDDING ON ROSH CHODESH ELUL 5709*. SITTING NEAR HIM IS RABBI SHLOMO AHARON KAZARNOVSKY WHO TRAVELED TO CHICAGO AS THE FRIEDIKER REBBE'S REPRESENTATIVE AT THE WEDDING.

would never be seen afterwards.

“At exactly 9:30 p.m., Rabbi Mentlick walked out of his office together with the gentleman I had seen in the morning. I now understood that he was no *schnorrer*. He brought him to the *bima* and announced, ‘I want to introduce to you a friend of the yeshiva, Mr. Yosef Robinson.’

“That name immediately rang a bell. The yeshiva had a *gemach* called the Joseph Robinson Gemilas Chesed Fund, which would give *bochurim* a \$25 loan, free of interest.

“I later found out more about him:

“Reb Yossel lived in Chicago, where he was a very successful businessman and philanthropist; there was a *mikveh* and other institutions in his name.

“When the Frierdiker Rebbe came to Chicago in 5690* (תרצ״ו), Reb Yossel wasn’t even 20 years old. He was just starting out in business, but he had an important asset: he owned a car. The Frierdiker Rebbe made a very big impression on him, so he went into *yechidus* and offered to be his driver during his stay in the city.

“The Frierdiker Rebbe agreed and Reb Yossel had the merit to spend a considerable amount of time in his presence, becoming very devoted to him.

“He once told the Frierdiker Rebbe that he wanted very much to donate towards his causes, but he was just starting out in business and didn’t have any money to give. The Frierdiker Rebbe responded that if he wanted to give *mit an emes* (sincerely), Hashem would give him the opportunity to make a lot of money and give a lot of *tzedakah*.

“Indeed, as the years went on, he became phenomenally successful and donated large sums of money to the



RABBI MENTLICK FARBRENGS WITH THE BOCHURIM IN 770.

Friediker Rebbe and the Rebbe.

“Anyways, back to his speech in the yeshiva.

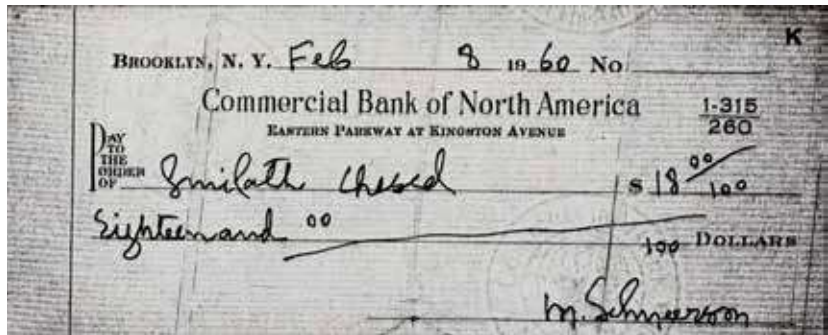
“He said that he had visited 770 and spent the day there to observe the yeshiva. The key line that he told us was this: ‘This is not a yeshiva. This is West Point. You are not here to merely learn Torah or learn how to learn Torah. You are here to become officers for Yiddishkeit. And to be an officer, you must have discipline.’

“He gave a long speech about keeping *seder*. ‘I expect everyone here at 7:30, after *mikveh*, not half-asleep. At 9:00, you put on your tefillin and meditate! And when Rabbi Mentlick leads the services at 9:30 [Rabbi Mentlick was saying *kaddish* that year]’ I expect everyone to daven with him! Then your day will proceed in an organized and principled way.’

“I must say, it was quite a unique farbrengen. There was no *mashke*, and the *mussar* wasn’t coming from Reb Dovid Raskin or Reb Yoel or even Reb Shmuel Levitin. It was an American businessman, and his words made an impact.”

From the Earliest Supporters

Reb Yossel Robinson was among a small group of Chicago



THE REBBE'S CHECK TO THE GEMILAS CHESED FUND FOR THE BOCHURIM ESTABLISHED BY REB YOSEF.

supporters (alongside Reb Yankel Katz and the Palmer brothers) that supported the Friediker Rebbe and the Rebbe during the first years in America, helping them lay the cornerstone for the *hafatzas hamaayanos* of the following decades.

Yossel was a strong personality, a go-getter, who — despite supporting many Jewish causes — harbored a particularly deep and profound love for the Rabbeim.

According to his grandson, Mr. Elliot Robinson, Reb Yossel cared deeply for the future of the Jewish people, and therefore he chose to support Lubavitch. He felt that Lubavitch was doing work that no one else was doing, and therefore it was vital to support them.

Mrs. Simon, Reb Yossel's daughter, is quite elderly, but she clearly

remembers her father always talking to Rabbi Kazarnovsky (his main contact in Lubavitch, along with Reb Yankel Katz and Reb Shlomo Zalman Hecht) and with 770. She even remembers 770's telephone number!

Rabbi Yosef Greenberg of Alaska shared the following:

“Many years ago, I became friendly with Reb Yossel's son, Sheldon, and he shared several stories about his father with me.

“This is one such story, which describes his personality well:

“The Friediker Rebbe once told him that the *mikveh* in Chicago was no longer in good condition, and a new one needed to be built. Reb Yossel called a meeting with the leading philanthropists of Chicago, bringing them all into a room. After they were seated, he locked the door and hid the key. ‘Nobody is going home tonight until the *mikveh* is fully funded!’

“You can just imagine the reaction of the people in the room. Needless to say, in the face of such determination, funding for the *mikveh* was quickly arranged, and until today, it is named for Reb Yossel Robinson.”

Reintroducing a Halachic Work

One of Reb Yossel's most well-remembered accomplishments is sponsoring the publication of *S'dei Chemed*, the work of Reb Chaim Chizkiyahu Medini.²

770 EASTERN PARKWAY SHORTLY BEFORE THE FRIEDIKER REBBE MOVED IN.



THE FOLLOWING PICTURES OF THE S'DEI CHEMED, REB CHAIM CHIZKIYAHU MEDINI, WERE TAKEN AS HE TOOK LEAVE OF HIS CONGREGATION IN CRIMEA. CIRCA 5568*.

Reb Chayim Chizkiyahu was an unassuming Yerushalmi-born rav of Sephardi origins who was gifted with a phenomenal memory. (For historical context - he lived around the same time as the Rebbe Maharash.)

Despite his considerable talents, he had difficulty finding *parnasah* in Eretz Yisroel, and became the rabbi of the little known, ancient Jewish community of Crimea which had a very low level of observance. During his years there, he managed to educate the population and raise the level of Yiddishkeit significantly.

He soon became well-known

throughout the Russian empire as a holy person and a brilliant *talmid chacham*. As a result, many of the wealthy Russian Jews would send him *sefarim* — for a simple reason. Rabbonim would often send new *sefarim* to wealthy Jews with the hope of receiving a donation in return. Not having use for them, many of these *gevirim* chose to send them to Reb Chaim Chizkiyahu, who soon amassed a library of over 10,000 *sefarim*. (After his passing, the Frierdiker Rebbe purchased many of his *sefarim* from the local government, which had confiscated much of the library; those *sefarim* are currently part of the Rebbe's library stranded in Russia.)

With access to such a library, he decided to embark on a mammoth project: to create an encyclopedia of halachic rulings. He wrote a multi-series volume work called S'dei Chemed, where — in alphabetical order — he wrote about every halachic concept at great length, from the *sugya* in Gemara down to the latest of the *acharonim*. It was a groundbreaking project; no similar encyclopedia existed (perhaps with the exception of *Pachad Yitzchak*, which had been published over 150 years earlier).

Needless to say, it became very popular among rabbonim when it was released in the early 5650s

(1890s). The Rebbe Rashab was very enthusiastic about the set as well; he wrote to Reb Chaim Chizkiyahu asking him to send several dozen sets to Lubavitch, so that he could personally disseminate them throughout the area.³

(Reb Chaim Chizkiyahu later moved to Eretz Yisroel and founded a yeshiva in Chevron, in Beit Romano. Before his passing, he sold the building to the Rebbe Rashab for Yeshivas Toras Emes.)

After World War II, with the destruction of European Jewry, there was also a significant shortage of *halacha sefarim*. Therefore, the Frierdiker Rebbe instructed Kehos to reprint the S'dei Chemed for the benefit of rabbonim around the world.

Upon receiving the directive from the Frierdiker Rebbe, the Rebbe — then director of Kehos — began working intensively on the project. Rights for publication were procured from Reb Yehudah Shmotkin,⁴ who had received the rights of publication to S'dei Chemed before the war. Several *yungerleit* were brought in to work on reorganizing the large and complex set and creating comprehensive *mafteichos* for it. The Rebbe himself spent countless hours personally going through every page, editing their work and adding much of his own.⁵

The cost of the publication was prohibitive. In the Rebbe's own words, "I did not envision" the true cost of the work. To provide funding, the Rebbe first turned to a wealthy individual named Reb Eliezer Kroizer, who sponsored the beginning of the set. However, the Rebbe soon turned to Reb Yossel Robinson, and he agreed to sponsor the rest of it.

When the time came to publish, Reb Yossel was low on cash and he asked that no donations be solicited until his situation was sorted out. He even asked that a





RABBI HODAKOV WRITES TO REB YOSEF REGARDING THE PUBLICATION OF THE SDEI CHEMED.

certain check — already in the hands of the Frierdiker Rebbe — not be cashed until he could ensure the funds were present in his account.

The Rebbe wrote openly about the issue to Reb Yankel Katz of Chicago, one of Reb Yossel's good friends:

"There is a problem: The publisher wants money. The people want the *sefarim*. The [Frierdiker] Rebbe has *taanos* why we publish so little... and suddenly we receive this letter!

"...I hope that you will take the matter into your hands and work out the matter with our friend Mr. Robinson. Meanwhile, I will continue the work; I don't want the Rebbe's *kpeidah* on me or on him..."⁶

In a letter directly to Reb Yossel, the Rebbe's close relationship to him is apparent:

"There is no need to mention the *maamar Chazal*, 'Aser bishvil shetisasher.' When a Jew gives tzedakah, it is a *makor* and *kli* for livelihood. You see this clearly, especially in recent times, in how my father-in-law the Rebbe *shlita* brings you opportunities for *parnasah*..."⁷

Ultimately, Reb Yossel was able to make the payments and the *sefarim* were published. The first volume was presented at his son's wedding in Chicago by Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky, the Frierdiker Rebbe's representative to the wedding.

(Another special mention regarding the wedding: Several days earlier, Reb Yossel and his son flew to New York to receive the Frierdiker Rebbe's *bracha*. The Frierdiker Rebbe received them while wearing his *spodik*, and blessed them warmly.)

A special moment by the Rebbe regarding the S'dei Chemed took place in Sivan of 5710*, a few months after the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus*. But first, another important story must be told.

Burning the Mortgage

When the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in America, Agudas Chasidei Chabad purchased the building of

BROAD & BOLD

Reb Yossel's last surviving daughter, Mrs. Simon, shared the following story about her father's communal activism:

"During the war years, my father worked very hard to raise money to save Jews from Europe. At one point, he had an opportunity to save Jews but he needed funding to make it happen. He decided to visit the Chicago mafia, which was known to have active Jewish members.

"One night, he visited their smokey basement where the mafia guys were gambling with large wads of cash. When the bodyguard at the entrance asked him what he wanted, he thrustured pictures of concentration camps in his face, and he quickly gained entry.

"When the mafia people heard why he had come, they immediately cleared all the cash off the table and handed it to him for his activities."



THE FRIEDIKER REBBE DURING HIS VISIT IN THE UNITED STATES IN 5690*.

MAKING THE VESSEL

Rabbi Leibel Shapiro shared the following story:

“Later in life, Reb Yossel lost his wealth. Nevertheless, whenever he visited 770, he was held in very high regard for his decades of support.

“During one such visit, after Mincha, I saw him approach the Rebbe. Normally it was against protocol, but none of the *mazkirim* tried to stop him. He told the Rebbe that he wasn’t feeling well, so the Rebbe responded that he should be examined by Dr. Seligson. Then I heard the Rebbe say something amazing:

“*Un dos vet zein der keili b’derech hateva oif di refua*—that will be the vessel, the natural means for your healing.”

770 for the relatively low sum of \$30,000 (equivalent to roughly half a million dollars today). Due to the difficult financial situation, only one-sixth of the price was paid up-front and a mortgage was obtained for \$25,000, to be paid in yearly installments of \$1,350 (= \$26,000 today) for the duration of 20 years.⁸

Shortly after the Frierdiker Rebbe’s *histalkus*, Reb Yossel Robinson took it upon himself to pay up the remainder of the debt and “burn” the mortgage. It was considered a very big deal, relative to Chabad’s financial situation at the time, and, upon Reb Yossel’s request, the Rebbe held a special *farbrengen* to mark the occasion.

It was at the height of the campaign to convince the Rebbe to accept the *nesius*. Therefore, in the preparations for the *farbrengen*, Reb Yisroel Jacobson prepared a special head-table for the Rebbe to sit at. However, the Rebbe refused to sit according to his arrangement, and instead sat down in his regular spot, in the middle of the long table at the back of the *zal* — with Reb Yossel at his side.

The Rebbe delivered a *sicha* about the meaning of a home according to Chassidus, and declared that 770 is

not only a private home but a “general home for the entire Jewish people.”

It was a special occasion, the Rebbe said, because the Frierdiker Rebbe didn’t have full ownership over the home due to the mortgage. However, “the very fact that the Rebbe left the debt and waited 10 years for this specific individual to redeem the house, is in itself a great *zechus* [for him], because the Rebbe didn’t take money from someone just because he wanted to give.”⁹

During the *farbrengen*, Reb Yossel asked the Rebbe to teach something from the volumes of *S’dei Chemed* which had just been published.

The Rebbe agreed and added, “The publication of *S’dei Chemed*, in truth, deserves a *farbrengen* of its own.”

The Rebbe handed the key to his room to the *bochur* Sholom Chaskind and asked him to bring any volume of *S’dei Chemed*. When he returned with the fourth volume, the Rebbe handed it to Reb Yossel and asked him to open it randomly. The Rebbe read the contents of the page for a few moments, and then delivered a *sicha* about it.

The page opened was *maareches daled minim*, where the author discussed the issue of paying for an *esrog* immediately, thereby ensuring that it belongs to you completely, as per Torah’s instruction of “*u’lekachtem lachem* — you shall take for you.”

The Rebbe noted that the Frierdiker Rebbe actually did the exact opposite — he followed the *minhag* to delay paying for the *esrog*. In the *sicha*, the Rebbe explained how delaying payment didn’t actually disqualify the purchase, because of the *meshicha*, the commitment to pay later, and for various other reasons as well.



Making it Possible

Beyond the unique merit of paying off 770's mortgage, Reb Yossel had another unique *zechus* with the same donation:

Throughout the Frierdiker Rebbe's years in America, the Frierdiker Rebbe provided a large part of the funding for the Rebbe's institutions, Merkos, Machne Yisroel and Kehos. With the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus*, the financial future of those institutions was put into jeopardy. At the end of Sivan 5710*, the Rebbe held a meeting with the senior Chassidim, where he told them about the lack of funding in the *mosdos* and explained that the work must continue — and he could therefore not take on any new responsibilities until they were made financially stable. For Chassidim, the indication was clear: They should not bother asking the Rebbe to assume the *nesius* unless the institutions were properly funded.¹⁰

Chassidim say that Reb Yossel made his large donation for the same reason. According to some accounts, the Rebbe indicated that he would not be able to assume the *nesius* with such large *chovos* weighing down on 770 and Lubavitch. Upon receiving that message, Reb Yossel agreed to take the cost on himself.

Hence, Reb Yossel has an immense *zechus* by taking part in the start of *dor hashvi'i*. ❶

1. After the passing of his father-in-law, Reb Dovid Stockhomer. It should be noted that others placed this story in 5725*, when the Rebbe was davening at the amud.

2. For more information regarding this story, see *Hotzo'as Sefarim Kehos*, pg. 100.

3. *Igros Kodesh Admur Harashab* vol. 1 pg. 164.

4. Father of Rabbi Yisroel Shmotkin, shliach to Wisconsin.

5. See *Igros Kodesh* vol. 4 pg. 487.

6. *Igros Kodesh* vol. 3 pg. 105

7. *Ibid.* pg. 115.

8. *Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz* vol. 13 pg. 303. Regarding this section, see *Beis Chayenu* pg. 123.

9. *Toras Menachem* vol. 1 pg. 82.

10. See *Toras Menachem* vol. 1 pg. 115, *Yimei Bireishis* pg. 175

11. The *Sentinel*—The voice of Chicago Jewry was a weekly newspaper of the Chicago Jewish community from 1911-1977.



REB YOSSEL READILY AGREED

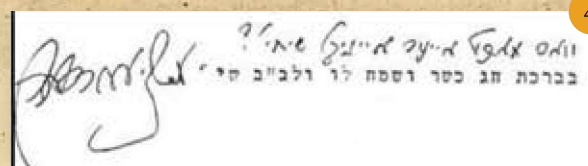
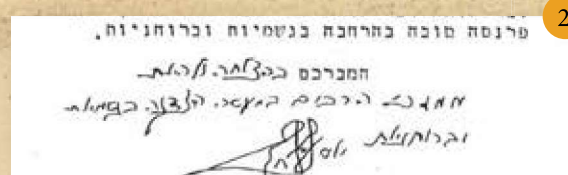
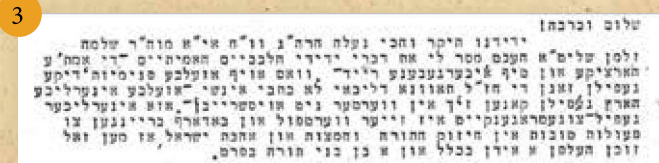
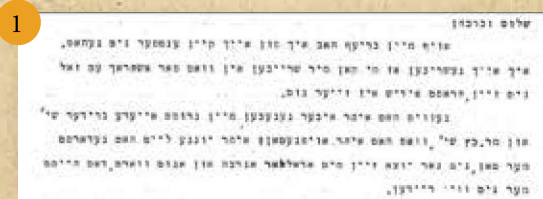
Presented here is a letter from Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Hecht of Chicago, written to the Rebbe in Adar 5709*, during the Frierdiker Rebbe's lifetime, about Reb Yossel's great interest in Lubavitch activities and his willingness to be involved in any way possible.

To the esteemed son-in-law of the Rebbe, the great and known rav, renowned for his Torah and holy work, the amazing person, in the most literal sense of the word, a man of remarkable middos, Harav Hagaon, Harav Hachossid, Harav Menachem Schneerson,

Shalom u'Bracha!

When I got back [to Chicago], I spoke with our most esteemed friend, Reb Yosef Robinson, and I conveyed the [Frierdiker] Rebbe's words about his private affairs.

In the conversation, when I described to him how the [Frierdiker] Rebbe became an American citizen, and how important it would be for the [Frierdiker] Rebbe's activities to be publicized in the English newspapers, he took upon himself to publish an article in the *Sentinel* newspaper¹¹ at his expense, provided that I give him a nicely written piece about the [Frierdiker] Rebbe's activities, obviously written as a biography, along with a photograph of the [Frierdiker] Rebbe. I asked him to try and have this as the cover story and he agreed to this as well. We decided to try to have this published in the Pesach edition of the paper. Right now we are waiting for your response, along with the appropriate material...



Letters

Over the years, Reb Yossel received many letters from the Frieddiker Rebbe and the Rebbe. The following are some unique selections¹:

1. The First Letter

Shortly before leaving the United States in 5690*, the Frierdiker Rebbe wrote a letter to the young Yosef Robinson.

"I did not receive an answer to my letter. I wrote to you that you can write to me in any language; simple Yiddish is just fine.

“You surely gave my regards to your brothers and to Mr. Katz. What have you accomplished [for Yiddishkeit]? You youngsters should be doing more. Don’t suffice with a dollar donation and a nice word — that’s just talk...”

2. Mezakei Harabim

On a *nichum aveilim* letter, the Friediker Rebbe added in his own holy handwriting:

“[I bless you] with success, and to be of the *mezakei harabim* with acts of tzedakah, physically and spiritually.”

3. True Heartfelt Words

In a letter from the Frierdiker Rebbe:

“Our good friend Reb Shlomo Zalman Hecht delivered the genuine and heartfelt message from you, my good friend. In regards to such *pnimiusdike* sentiments, Chazal say, ‘The letters of the heart cannot be expressed in words.’² Such a genuine dedication is very valuable and must surely bring to good deeds in strengthening Torah and mitzvos and *ahavas Yisroel*...”

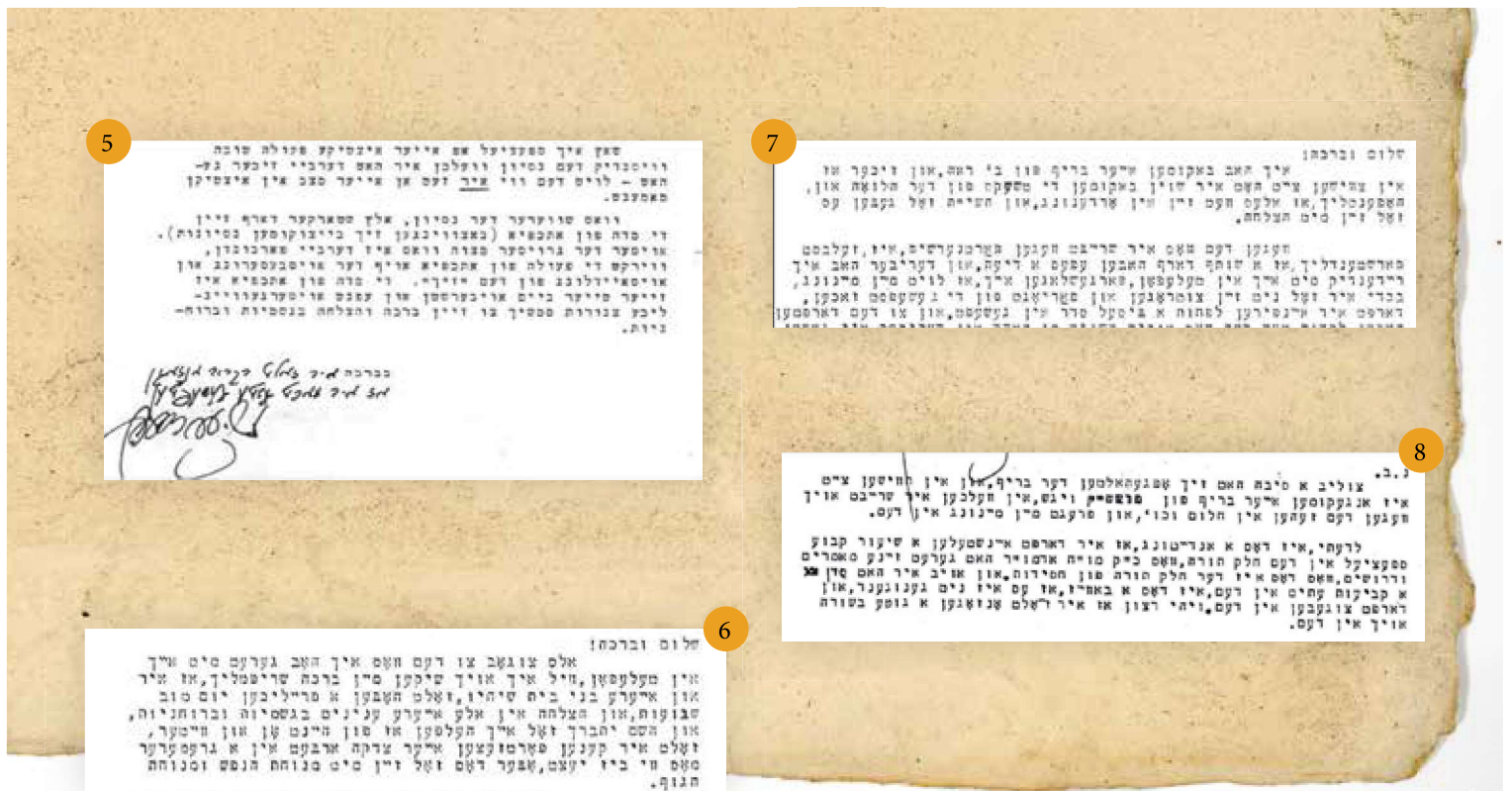
4. How is your grandchild?

On a *nichtav klali-prati* in 5711*, the Rebbe adds in handwriting, “How is your grandchild, *sheyichye*?”

5. True Appreciation

In 5712*, Reb Yossel fell on hard times. When he nevertheless continued to contribute, the Rebbe wrote the following in appreciation:

“...I especially value your current good deed knowing the *nisayon* you, no doubt, had to overcome...



"The more difficult the *nisayon*, the stronger your *iskafya*... *iskafya* makes an impact, elevating and refining the person. *Iskafya* is very precious to Hashem and opens new conduits for his blessing..."

In handwriting, the Rebbe adds, "[With blessing] that you should very soon bear the news of good business..."

6. In Addition to Our Conversation

In this letter from 5712*, we learn about a special *kiruv* to which Reb Yossel was *zoche* — telephone conversations with the Rebbe:

"In addition to our conversation on the telephone, I want to write my *bracha* as well..."

7. Partnership

The following letter seems to indicate that the Rebbe loaned Reb Yossel money and entered into a "partnership" with him in 5712*.

"I received your letter... and you have, by now, surely received the checks of the loan..."

"In regards to what you wrote regarding the partnership: Obviously, a partner should have the right to offer an opinion, and therefore, when we spoke on the telephone, I proposed that..."

8. The Dream

In the postscript to this letter, the Rebbe tells him how to regard a dream that he had:

"I received your letter in which you write about seeing in your dream, etc. and you request my opinion.

"In my opinion, it is an indication that you need to study a regular *shiur* in the part of Torah in which the Rebbe, my father-in-law, spoke his *maamarim* and *drushim*, in other words, in Chassidus..."

1. Teshura, Turin, 23 Adar I 5776.
2. See Sanhedrin 35b and Rashi.