



Josef Michl

Joy
Between a Rock
and a Hard Place

By Mason M. Michl

To my amazing 2nd grade teacher, Ms. Long,

In loving memory of my grandfather, who passed shortly after I completed my song interview with him. I am very sad he is gone, but so happy that I got to know him a bit better because of this heritage project. Thank you!!

With love and gratitude,

Mason

5.24.24

(Thanks also to my dad for editing, typing, and book design)

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For my heritage project, I interviewed
my grandfather, Josef Michl.

I can't believe what I learned!

World famous chemist

War

No recess

Unsupervised free time for ten

minutes after each class

born 1939

family was poor because ^{his dad} lost his job

1/4 children

Not enough clothes

Not enough food

born with club feet



My grandfather, Josef Michl, was born in 1939 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, three days before it was occupied by Hitler's army.

This was only the first of many challenges he overcame on his way to becoming a world-famous chemist.

Now 85, he still teaches at the University of Colorado and leads two research groups, one in Colorado and one in Prague.



A humble man, with a great sense of humor. When asked why he has been nominated for the Nobel Prize but never won, he reminds people, with a twinkle in his eye, "There are countless awards which I have not won."



The oldest of 4 children, he grew up very poor, as his father refused to join the Communist Party. He was removed from his position as a judge at the highest Czech appellate court and instead had to be a notary in a much smaller city three hours away by train.

Josef wore hand-me-down used clothes which his mother repaired as needed with a needle and thread. His mother, a housewife, found some work sorting mushrooms, and he was able to earn some money tutoring other students.

Growing up during the war was not easy. Sometimes they had only mashed potatoes to eat for days on end.

He also barely survived a bombing in 1945, during which American bombers got lost and bombed Prague instead of nearby German city of Dresden.



Sister, father, and Josef



The Matterhorn, in Switzerland

As if these weren't enough challenges, he was born with club feet, meaning without any heel bones. He had 8 surgeries by the time he was 14, with doctors able to build heels for him from bone taken from elsewhere on his legs.

He was never able to run, but overcame this to become a mountain climber and lifelong hiker, he climbed the Matterhorn and Mt. Kilimanjaro, one of the highest mountains in the world.

While he has many illnesses in old age, he still goes hiking every Tuesday in the mountains above Boulder, Colorado, usually 5 miles or more.

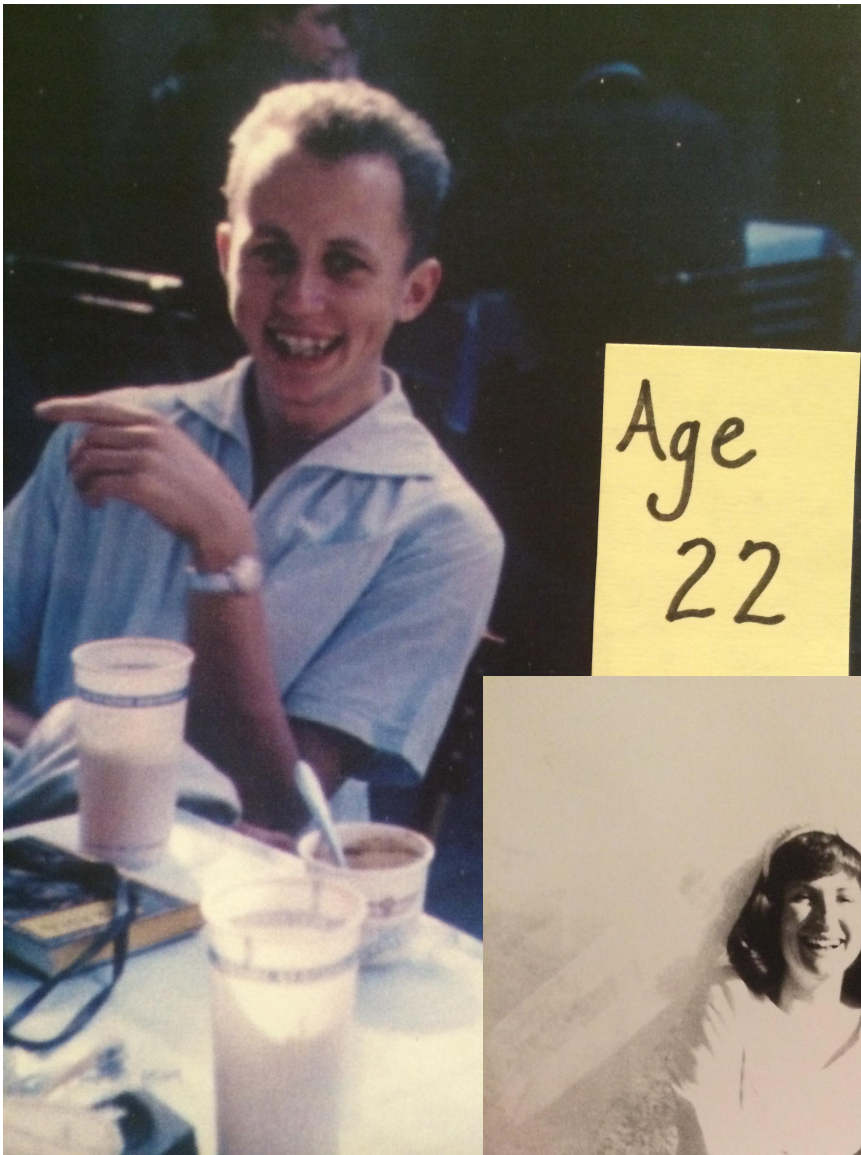


My dad and I embarking with him on an icy 4-mile hike, often without a trail!



By 15 he was already tutoring much older students.

His love for chemistry began at age ten, with a fire demonstration in class. He inherited a home chemistry set from an older boy in his building, and a book titled "Experiments That Don't Fail" led him through many dangerous experiments as a young boy. At various times he made exploding clay marbles, dissolved a (valuable) silver spoon, made the whole apartment stink like rotten eggs for weeks, played with mercury, and nearly dissolved his face with acid, all in a small closet with no ventilation.



At 22 he was beginning his graduate studies and would soon travel to America.



He wed my American grandmother atop a mountain in Austria.



My father and late aunt as beloved children.

Despite all of the difficulties from the historical events that created incredible challenges in his early life, he is a happy person who appreciates what he does have, rather than being unhappy about an unfair life.



We still have family in Prague that I get to see every summer



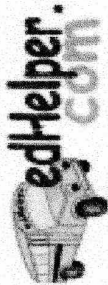
I had a great time on this camping trip with him last year!

My Notes

Before writing the narrative you've read, my classmates and I also created a Double Bubble Map after we interviewed our ancestor.

There were a lot of things I learned that didn't make it into the narrative. Some of them are captured in this compare and contrast diagram.

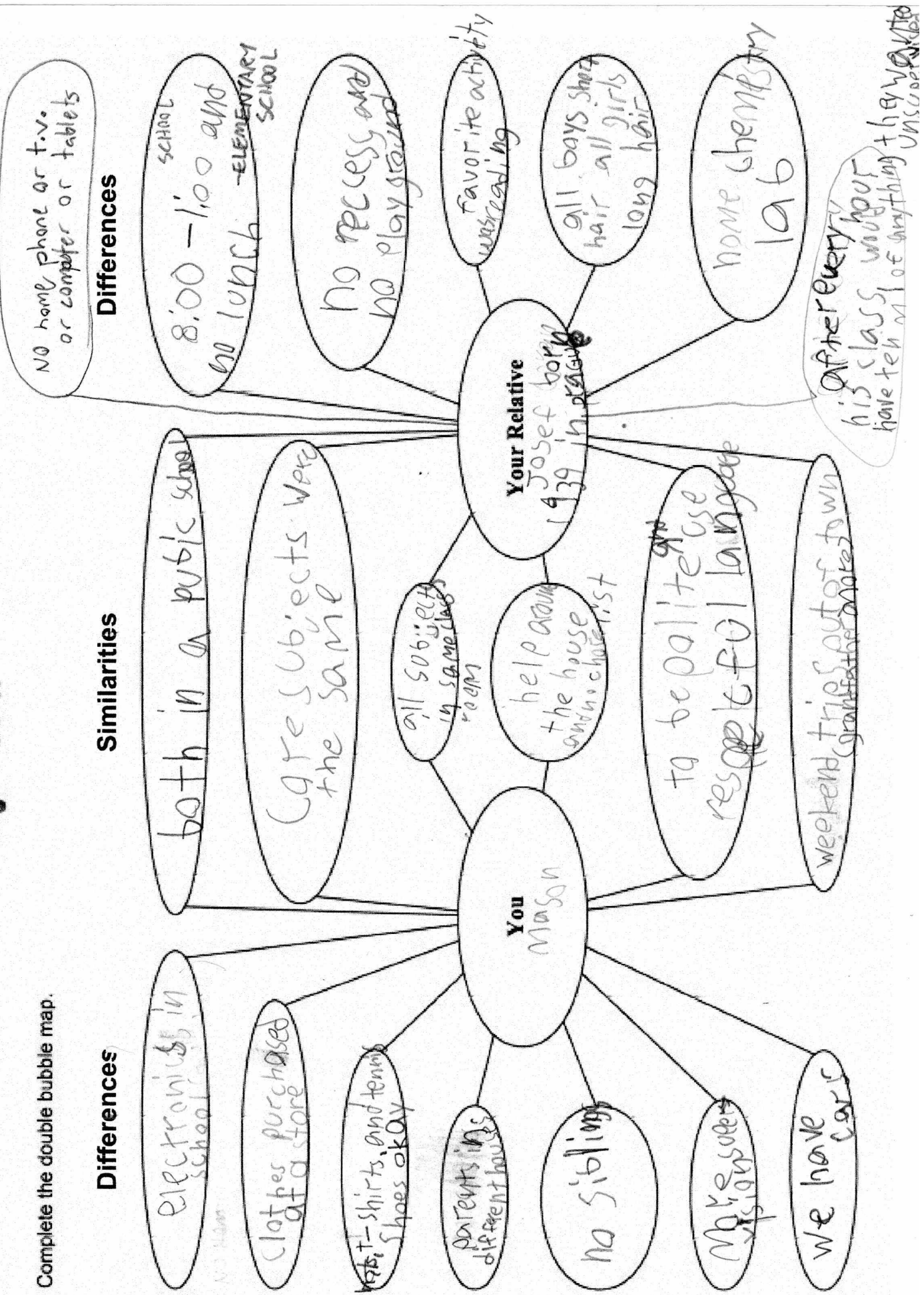
What is most surprising to you?



Name Mason

Date 4/23/24

Complete the double bubble map.



Differences

- electronics in school
- clothes purchased at a store
- t-shirts and tennis shoes okay
- parents in different houses
- no siblings
- M's sisters
- we have car

Similarities

- both in a public school
- care subjects were the same
- all subjects in same class room
- help around the house and no chore list
- to be polite and respectful language
- weekend trips out of town

Differences

- no home phone or t.v. or computer or tablets
- 8:00-1:00 and no lunch - elementary school
- no recess and no playground
- favorite activity was reading
- all boys short hair all girls long hair
- home chemistry lab
- after every hour his class would have ten min of anything they wanted

The real gold was in the interview itself, which lasted several hours. I did my best to write down the parts that applied to my questions, but he shared so much more with me too.

The following four pages are my interview notes. They represent only a little of what I learned, but I hope that you take a few minutes to read through them and imagine how amazing the experience of interviewing him was for me.

I've known him my whole life, but interviewing him opened my eyes to how much I hadn't learned about him through our normal interactions - and what an incredible person he truly was.

Manson

Interview Questions for Heritage Unit

GRANDFATHER BORN 1939, PRAGUE Czechoslovakia

Education

1. What was the span of years of the schools you attended?

1945 age 6 - 1956 high school.

2. What type of school did you attend?

public school.

3. What subjects did you study?

grades 1-3 ENGLISH (SPECIAL SCHOOL) ^{closed BY GOV'T}
Czech, math, natural science,
MUSIC (Singing), PE, Russian (4th grade on)

4. How long was your school day?

8:00-1:00. (no lunch at school)

5. Did you have recess? If so, how many? What did you play?

no recess, no playground, they did
have ten minutes un supervised

6. What is one experience you remember most about your educational experience?

chemistry experiment with
fire in fourth grade, decided to become
chemist

students were in 1 room
all day
between classes also a 15
minute snack unsupervised

MASON

7. What did you talk about at the dinner table? World issues? School? Life lessons?

about school, 3 siblings
After '48 no talk of COMMUNISM ^{FOR FEAR OF RETRIBUTION}

8. favorite activity was reading

9. 2x/week private english lessons in evenings
starting 2nd grade. ONLY 1 of 4 kids to go.
Completed at 15 and passed ENGLISH TEST

OLDER BOY IN BUILDING GAVE
HIM A SMALL LAB w/ CHEMICALS

USED BOOK CALLED "EXPERIMENTS THAT WILL WORK"

CHEMISTRY LAB

IN SMALL CLOSET w/OUT
VENTILATION

NITROBENZENE
(BITTER ALMONDS)
FOR WEEKS

SULFUR ~~DIOXIDE~~ HYDROGEN SULFIDE
(ROTTEN EGGS) + POISSONOUS

DISSOLVED SILVER SPOON
IN NITRIC ACID

COPPER + SILVER

SODIUM METAL + WATER
EXPLODES, SOMETIMES FIRE

~~WATER~~

CONSTRUCTION SET FOR
CHILDREN

LATER (10th grade)

MASON

7.

8.

Clothing

1. What clothes did you wear to school? Was there a dress code?

HAND ME DOWNS FROM RELATIVES IN BRAZIL + CANADA
MOTHER KNEW HOW TO SEW + KNIT TO FIX + REPAIR.
NO SCHOOL DRESS CODE, ALL SHIRTS HAD A COLLAR, MAYBE SWEATER
OR JACKET

2. If you did have specific clothes, what did you wear to play in?

SAME THING ALL THE TIME NO SPORTS CLOTHES UNLESS
ON A TEAM

3. What type of shoes did you play in?

HAD SPECIALTY SHOES DUE TO MULTIPLE FOOT SURGERIES
TENNIS SHOES LATER KIDS - LEATHER DRESS SHOES

4. Did you wear hats?

NO, NO KIDS WORE HATS
ONLY KNITTED HATS IN WINTER

5. How did you wear your hair?

PART IN THE MIDDLE
ALL BOYS HAD SHORT HAIR.
ALL GIRLS HAD LONG HAIR

SPRING, + FALL → LAYERS AS NEEDED

MASON

6.

Values

- MADE \$ BY TUTORING OTHER STUDENTS - ALLOWANCE
no longer needed
1. Where you required to do chores at home? Did you earn an allowance?
30 minutes per day drying dishes + simple tasks
ALLOWANCE - middle school, but poor family after father was thrown out of job (JUDGE)
2. Was there a particular way you were to speak to/address adults?
be polite, no bad words - to all, not just adults
CZECH LANGUAGE HAS FORMALITY TOWARD ADULTS
3. Were you required to stand when adults walked into the room?
WHEN GUESTS CAME OVER
ALL STUDENTS MUST STAND WHEN TEACHER ENTERED ROOM
4. What types of manners did your parents teach you?
PLEASE, THANK YOU, BE POLITE, ~~WELL~~ TABLE MANNERS, TO BE
EXCUSED, NEVER BAD WORDS - NO ONE IN FAMILY
5. Were you required to spend time with the family on the weekends? Why?
HIKES IN FOREST OR MOUNTAINS (OUTSIDE OF TOWN)
HE LOVED THIS - OPPORTUNITY TO ASK FATHER ALL KINDS OF QUESTIONS.
6. Did the entire family sit down for dinner on a regular basis? Daily? Weekly?
YES, DAILY

Epilogue

(added by my father)

Mason interviewed his Grandfather in late April, and turned in the narrative in this book on May 2nd. I chose not to revise it to be past tense.

On May 10th of 2024 Josef boarded a plane to Prague, to host a global chemistry summit he had been organizing since before Covid.

On May 12th, he sent an email from Prague before bed, reporting that "All was well except for lack of sleep and a persistent cough." The cough had been with him about a week, and we think it was just a cold. He had enjoyed a dinner with colleagues.

On May 13th, he got up, got dressed, put on his shoes... and then never showed up to the summit. People immediately went to his apartment and found him on the floor in the fetal position, dead.

We do not yet know his cause of death. We do know that it was quick, and we take solace in knowing that he lived a great and full life, one that most could only dream of.

As Josef aged, he had developed various ailments, including Cancer, Diabetes, Heart Failure, and Asthma, all for at least the last 7-10 years. He would joke that it was a race to see which of them would get him. Until then, he disregarded his shortness of breath, continuing his long weekly hikes, often off trail, and working non-stop to advance human knowledge.

His late wife had passed suddenly in 2018 from a stroke as she was heading out the door, with shoes and jacket on. Since we don't know his cause of death yet, I like to think that none of his ailments "won their race", and instead he followed in his beloved's footsteps in a grand poetic gesture.



In Loving Memory

March 12, 1939 -
April 13, 2024