

Prologue

I was born John Lawrence Figel on November 15, 1954, the end of the so-called baby-boom era after World War II, to John and Jean Figel at McKeesport Hospital outside of Pittsburgh, PA. Read my first story in Chapter 1 of Volume 1 about how I became known as Jack throughout my life. My mother, Jean Helen (Katchur) Figel, gave birth at 3:15 pm that day, and every year throughout my life, I tried to call her at that exact time to wish her ‘Happy Mother’s Day!’



Day Zero -
the day I was born

My parents had been married for about two years when I came along. We were a typical family in the Pittsburgh area, but somewhat unique: all of my grandparents came from immigrant families of Eastern Europe, in fact, from villages within about 20 miles of each other on the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. When my grandparents were born around the turn of the 20th century, it was known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was divided into many countries after World War I and the Treaty of Paris. Those villages are in present-day Slovakia, and I have been back to my homeland several times, finding family there; more stories of my family heritage are in Volume 8 of this collection.

Mom and Dad were high school sweethearts and even knew each other as young children. They lived around the corner from each other in an area of the City of Duquesne known as “the Bottoms,” down near one entrance to Duquesne Works of United States Steel. Both my grandfathers, John Figel and John Katchur, worked there as laborers. Both my grandmothers, Mary Figel and Mary Katchur, were “stay-at-home” moms, although Grandma Figel also worked part-time as a seamstress for a local clothing store in downtown Duquesne.

Dad graduated from Duquesne High School in 1947, and Mom in 1948. Mom belonged to a group of six girls called “the gang” who were best friends until the day they died. They were all married within a few years of each other and raised families of 2-6 children each, many of whom have kept in contact 75 years later! When Dad passed away in 2014, we discovered that five couples of the gang had burial plots in the same cemetery, all by coincidence. I remarked at his funeral, “Ok, one day,

the local police will be called by neighbors complaining of noise in the cemetery – the gang will be having a late-night party!” Almost all the “gang” are gone now, and so, in some ways, this collection is dedicated to them.

When I was six weeks old, my dad was drafted into the US Army to serve in the Korean War. After his basic training, we moved to Washington, DC, for about two years, living off-base as a family on Capitol Hill. He was stationed at an anti-aircraft battery in Camp Springs, MD, protecting Andrews Air Force Base just south of the city. See Volume 1 for more stories on my childhood and education through college.

After college in Rochester, NY, I moved back to Washington and worked five years for the US Government at the Federal Power Commission and then at a special agency within the Executive Office of the President called the Federal Inspector for the Alaska Gas Pipeline. Leaving the government in 1981, I worked for a computer software company named Metier Management Systems, specializing in project management. Our product was called Artemis. I was based in Virginia for two years in sales, then three years in Houston in marketing, and finally three years at the London worldwide headquarters. In 1991, I left the company and started my own consulting business, Figel Technologies International. See Volume 2 on my professional career for more details.

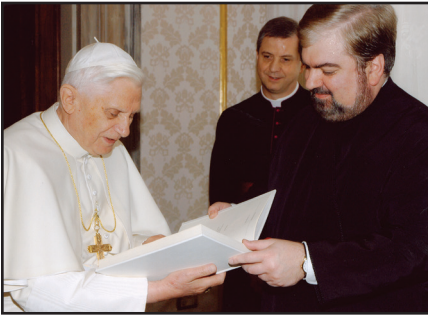
In 1993, I started a hobby publishing books for the Eastern Christian Churches that has grown into my semi-retirement, Eastern Christian Publications, with over 300 books published in 30 years. See Volume 3 for details on all my major publication projects.

In 1997, I was inspired to start an ecumenical conference called Orientale Lumen, and the attendees at the first conference voted that we should continue meeting on an annual basis. That has grown into the Orientale Lumen Foundation with meetings in Washington and around the world (four years virtual during the pandemic), pilgrimages, seminary concert tours, with streaming video and audio podcasts called OLTV. See Volume 4 for more details about the Washington conferences and Volume 5 about all the others and OLTV.

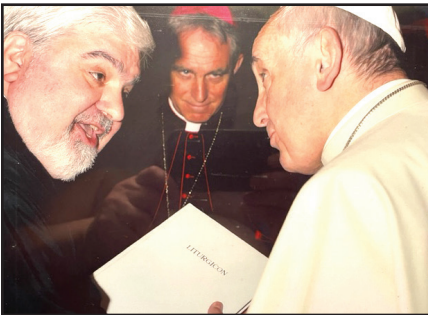
By publishing several important historical books, I have been blessed with seven private audiences with three popes – John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis – and over 25 encounters with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in person, sometimes one-on-one. He even now recognizes me as “Mr. Jack the Book Publisher” when we meet. He often jokes with me that I bring him gifts of books that he will never have time to read! So, Volume 6 of my autobiographical collection is recollections of



Meeting Saint Pope John Paul II



Meeting Pope Benedict XVI



Meeting Pope Francis



Meeting Pope Leo XIV

these special audiences.

Volume 7 includes descriptions of my various pilgrimages to holy sites, either personally or when leading large and small groups. It also describes three Seminary Concert Tours that I organized and sponsored for seminarians from our Greek Catholic seminaries in Presov, Slovakia, and Transcarpathia, Ukraine. Those tours consisted of a group of choir members, anywhere from 12 to 20. I drove them around from church to church all over the Northeast and Midwest United States, giving concerts every night and collecting donations to support the seminaries. In all, we raised nearly \$200,000 from three tours.

My younger sister suggested I should write down stories of our family heritage, finding roots in the Old Country, and other significant family events. That's in Volume 8.

One of my friends who has visited my home often also suggested that I should feature all the collections on display in my house—swords hanging in the Great Room, Oriental carpets on the floor, icons and paintings on



*Meeting Ecumenical Patriarch
Bartholomew*

the walls, signed books and special editions in my bookcases, coins collected 50 years ago in the Boy Scouts, Star Trek ship models, a Civil War chess set, and all the knick-knacks from my travels. So those are featured in Volume 9.

I have two photo albums full of over 100 scorecards from golf courses around the world that I have played. If I put my thinking cap on, I might be able to remember a story, or even a golf shot, from each one. A scanned image of each card and a photo of each course might be interesting. Those are organized by geography in Volume 10.

My consulting business stopped in 2010 when I took time off to manage the construction of a new building for my home parish, Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church in Annandale, VA. However, my two hobbies – book publishing and the ecumenical foundation – have turned into my retirement “career” as I passed the age of 65 and qualified for Medicare and Social Security.



The new Epiphany Church 2011

Over the years, as I’ve told people stories of my life, they have always said, “Jack, you should write a book!” So, I took them up on it and wrote this autobiography.

As I started to structure the stories, I discovered that 1) there were too many to fit into one reasonably sized book, and 2) I have thousands of pictures in my archives. My dad was a photographer from day one, and I’ve graduated from an Instamatic to 35 mm to digital camera to smartphone. So, each of these volumes will contain stories and pictures with captions. Some will correspond, but in many cases, I have stories with no pictures or pictures with no stories. I’ve decided to include them all to leave a complete legacy.

Enjoy!