



Eric Carle, author and illustrator of the classic "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," kept a photo of his childhood in Syracuse. Carle, shown on the NBC "Today" set, spent a lifetime curious about the fate of the unnamed girl in the photo. (AP Photo / Richard Drew)

Finding a friend separated by an ocean, a war and generations

An 'Easter Miracle'

By Sean Kirst
skirst@syracuse.com

For more than 80 years, Eric Carle — the internationally celebrated author and illustrator of children's books — wondered about the mystery of the girl in the white dress, in his native Syracuse. As a 3-year-old, Eric was photographed in a joyful embrace with that little girl on the city's North Side. The image carried no identification or location. As he grew older, Eric was intrigued by the story of the girl in the picture, to the point where a fanciful take on her story became central to a book called "Friends" that Eric released last year.

While he said the new book had multiple inspirations, the cover art was based specifically on the original photo, which he included alongside the final page. Eric, now 84 and living in Massachusetts, used the last line in the book for this statement:

"I often think about my

long-ago friend, and I wonder what happened to her."

Sunday, in what Eric and his wife, Bobbie, described as an "Easter Miracle," he found out.

The odds against it happening seemed overwhelming. Both children came from immigrant families that moved frequently in the early 1930s. Eric didn't remember his young friend's name, and even if he had, the chances were good she'd have a different name, a married name, by 2014. Beyond all else, even if those pieces miraculously came together, she'd still need to be alive and thriving in her mid-80s.

This week, by overnight mail, Eric is sending her his book.

Eric is the author of such children's classics as "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." Yet the central illustration in "Friends" is a reflection of the mysterious photo, which shows Eric, at 3, exchanging a hug with the girl in a white dress. At the bottom of the actual picture, his mother wrote "Juni" — German for June — and the year, 1932.

The image haunted Eric, whose parents returned to their native Germany when he was six. Before they left, Eric's passion for drawing had been encouraged in Syracuse by Lena Frickey, a gentle first-grade teacher. In Germany, in harsh contrast, one of his earliest memories is of a teacher whipping his hands with a switch.

That set the tone for many years that resonated with struggle.

Almost immediately, Eric said, his parents realized going back to Germany was a mistake. His father, drafted into the military during World War II, ended up behind barbed wire in a Russian prison camp. He came home weighing 85 pounds, his health broken.

While Eric eventually returned to the United States, the image of his embrace with the little girl evolved into a wistful symbol of some warm and secure years. He remem-



Florence Ciani Trovato and Eric Carle on Syracuse's North Side in 1932.



Florence Ciani Trovato. (Photo provided by her family)

bered that she was Italian-American, from an immigrant family. Even as his work began to earn acclaim, the photo was a bridge to what Eric saw as a fleeting childhood.

He decided to use the photo as a cornerstone of "Friends," and he hoped against all odds it might lead him to the girl — even if the image lacked all clues, or any hint of a location. The challenge was locating a "girl" who'd now be in her 80s, a girl who posed with him in Syracuse while Herbert Hoover was still president.

On Easter Sunday, almost 82 years after the photograph was taken, Eric Carle learned

his friend was not only alive:

She was ready for his call.

Her name is Florence Ciani Trovato; at 85, she's a few months older than Eric, and shares his vibrancy. She was born in Syracuse, the daughter of Joe and Mary Ciani, who lived at the time on North McBride Street. Florence recalls regular visits to 305 John St., on the North Side. That was home to her maternal grandparents, Antonio and Lila Barresi, immigrants from Italy.

Florence can picture the steep hill on John Street — one of the few streets in the city still made of brick — and

MIRACLE, PAGE A-7

1	2	1
1	2	1
1	2	1

image

a high-quality page from The 3, or of photo by our staff rs, call go to apture.com. in to reprint material from rdard, contact arance Center, 3d Drive, 01923, 0 or go to ht.com.





Angela Trovato, of New Jersey, went through some old scrapbooks on Sunday and came up with this image of her mother, Florence, with a neighbor, young Eric Carle. The photo and a couple of others solved a mystery that Carle often pondered through the years.

Miracle on John Street

MIRACLE, FROM PAGE A 2

the railings people needed to walk up and down. What she doesn't quite remember from early childhood are a few details we gleaned from old city directories, discovered with the help of the Onondaga Historical Association: In 1931, for instance, Florence and her parents moved to 300 Carbon St., only two doors away from Antonio and Lila.

According to OHA records, Florence's grandparents often had tenants in their homes—including a German couple by the name of Carle, who had a little son:

Eric. Yes, Eric said, he remembers Antonio and Lila Barresi—and how they would move downstairs, into their basement, to cool off during hot Syracuse summers. While Eric's parents later settled in a different part of the North Side, the two families linked by that John Street residence apparently stayed in touch.

When the Carles were about to return to Germany, Eric said, Lila gave them some fresh bread, still warm from the oven. Eric remembers the feel, the aroma, of the bread. To him, the gesture was symbolic of how he felt about Syracuse and that stage of his life.

He did not want to leave. He did not want it to end.

As for his friend? Through a digital search we found Angela Trovato, Florence's daughter, who's gone online to research family history. Sunday, at her New Jersey home, Angela dug into a pile of old family photographs and found two black-and-white images, scared from being taped or secured many times. One showed a little girl and a little boy side-by-side on a stoop, at a spot that appears to be John Street, just above

Carbon. That was Florence and Eric, an image a startled Eric had never seen.

The other photo, apparently taken on John Street on the same day in 1932, brought exclamations of celebration from both the Trovatos and a Syracuse journalist searching for the link. It portrays the two children in an embrace, and it is an absolute match for the photo at the end of Eric's book. On the border of the image, someone had written: "Flo and Eric." The date "1932" was scrawled at top, although the chances are that's off by a year, based on family records.

Beyond reasonable doubt, it proved Florence was the mystery girl. Eric's longshot search had ended in success.

Angela, Florence's daughter, went looking for the photos after getting a call from the journalist, trying to identify the girl in the white dress. Angela was the key, the link who made it all happen. Once our research led us to her, she compared some dates and said in awe:

That girl might be my mother.

On Easter Sunday, we emailed Eric and his wife, Bobbie. We sent them the Trovato photos and a phone number for Florence. Eric expressed joyous disbelief, then made the call and spoke to Florence for the first time since 1932. While she remembered her own copy of the photo, she was not familiar with Eric's work as an artist. She couldn't recall their friendship from early childhood, except for a flash of memory about the photo and occasional references by relatives to "a German boy."

Yet in the same way as Eric, she'd held onto those mysterious pictures from Syracuse. "Who would have known,"

she said, "that they would have so much meaning to someone, after all these years."

Eric got off the phone, marveling at the revelation, and immediately wrote a note to Florence. He wondered if she might be interested, at some point, in a face-to-face meeting. He reflected on the astounding reality of two Depression-era children making contact for the first time since they parted more than 80 years ago.

"Many people wondered whether you would be found," he wrote to Trovato. "It is like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. My wife said it is an Easter Miracle!"

In the book, Eric includes an illustration of a little boy burdened by sadness after his friend "moved far away."

That timing is accurate, Florence said. In 1932, only months after the photos with Eric were taken, her parents settled in New York City. That's where she'd meet her husband of 59 years, Charlie Trovato.

Charlie died in 2007. Florence, who worked as a school secretary, is retired in Florida. She had one big question Sunday after Eric reached her by phone. She asked why a single image, from so many years ago, held such meaning in his life.

He told her he was an only child, and that he felt uprooted and isolated when his family went to Germany. The experience taught Eric how lasting friendship is the source of the deepest happiness, the resonant theme of his new book.

Nothing's changed, except the ending: Meet the girl in the white dress.

Email Sean.Kirst@syracuse.com or write to him in care of The Post-Standard, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13221.



On Easter Sunday, children were playing again along John Street at the same spot where Eric Carle and Florence Carol Trovato were photographed almost 82 years ago. From left, Ajanee Reeves, 2, Unique Reeves, 3, Manny Martino, 5, Mitchell Paul, 5, and, standing in back, Matthew Snow, 8. (Michael Gosselke / mrgosselk@syracuse.com)