

## Houdini Reading #1 (from Encyclopedia of World Biography)

Harry Houdini (1874-1926)--The Great Houdini--is a name that will forever define the term "escape artist." As the Budapest-born, American-bred performer would so often proclaim, "No prison can hold me; no hand or leg irons or steel locks can shackle me. No ropes or chains can keep me from my freedom."

No one before or since has so completely defined the art of escape as Harry Houdini, magician, actor, and stage personality. Old film footage and still photos recall Houdini as generations remember him--suspended upside-down high over the heads of the crowd, escaping from a straitjacket; plunging, manacled, into an icy river, only to reappear miraculously moments later; performing his signature Chinese Water Torture Cell illusion, in which audiences were invited to hold their breath along with Houdini as he made his escape from yet another watery coffin.

But there was a world of difference between what turn-of-the-century audiences saw, and what they thought they saw. Much of Houdini's escapes relied as much on myth and misdirection as they did on the magician's genuine physical and mental prowess. Likewise, Houdini made myth of his own life, elaborating details where he thought appropriate. Though in some documents Houdini claims to be born April 6, 1874, in Appleton, Wisconsin, this much is known: Erich Weiss, born March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary, was the youngest of three sons of Rabbi Samuel and Cecilia (Steiner) Weiss (the couple also had a daughter, Gladys).

### The Making of a Magician

To escape persecution and find a better life, the Weiss family immigrated to Appleton--"perhaps April 6 was the date Samuel Weiss arrived in Wisconsin," remarked Ruth Brandon in her [The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini](#). Other moves took the Weisses to Milwaukee and, eventually, New York. But the family remained poor. Completely devoted to his mother to the point of obsession, the young Erich sought ways to ease her hardscrabble life. At one point, he took to begging for coins in the street. True to his illusionist ways, he hid the coins around his hair and clothing, then presented himself to Cecilia with the command, "Shake me, I'm magic." She did, and a flood of coins spilled out.

Magic was Erich's second obsession--indeed, "the abounding takes of his childhood magical exploits carry the mythic fuzz Houdini liked to generate," as Brandon wrote. After serving as a young circus acrobat (Eric, Prince of the Air) the teenager focused his attention on locks and lockpicking. He financed his hobby by working as a necktie cutter--the garment trade being one of the few occupations open to Jews at that time.

So it was with great dismay from his parents that Erich announced he was giving up the tie business for show business. At age 17 he took the stage name Houdini, after the nineteenth century French magician Robert-Houdin. "Harry" was an accepted Americanized version of Erich. By age 20 Houdini had married Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner (known as Bess); she became his partner onstage as well.

As "Mysterious Harry and La Petit Bessie," the Houdinis played dime museums, medicine shows, and music halls, eventually working their way up to small billing at larger theaters. At one point, the couple toured with a circus. When escape tricks and magic didn't pan out, the pair billed themselves as a comedy act, cribbing old jokes from magazines, as Brandon noted in her book.

Typically, during these early years, Harry would perform his famed "Hindoo Needle Trick," in which he appeared to swallow 40 needles, then drew them from his mouth, threaded together. Bess became a well-prompted "mentalist," performing mind-reading routines based on an alpha-numeric code known to her and Harry. In 1895, in Massachusetts, Houdini first conceived the notion of escaping not from his own handcuffs, but from those of the local police. These stunts brought free publicity, which eventually led to the Houdinis' crack at the big time--a booking in the Hopkins Theatre, a top Chicago vaudeville house.

### **Houdini the Headliner**

American tours were followed by smash appearances in Europe. Of course, with success came imitators; after all, anyone could buy a version of the Hindoo Needle Trick (Houdini himself had purchased the illusion). But Houdini clones fell by the wayside as long as the original toured. Still, "he was always edgy with his contemporaries, and saw younger magicians only as rivals, ready to push him into obscurity," wrote Brandon.

So, ever seeking the bigger and better illusion, Houdini escaped from every combination of straitjackets, jails, coffins, handcuffs, and leg shackles. At each performance, he invited police officials onstage to examine him and his props for authenticity. But even this was a ruse, as Brandon wrote: "Houdini's skill as a magician, which meant he could palm, misdirect attention, and hide his [lockpicks] in unlikely places, came in useful here. A favoured hiding place was his thick, wiry hair. When he had to strip naked, he sometimes hid a small pick in the thick skin on the sole of a foot--not a spot that would ordinarily be searched."

But "something new was needed," said Brandon, "and on 5 January 1908, it appeared. It was a galvanized-iron can shaped like an extremely large milk can--large enough to hold a man: Houdini." As she went on to say, the can held 22 pails of water. Handcuffed, Houdini would immerse himself inside, but not before asking the audience to hold their breath along with him. "At the end of three minutes, by which time the audience's lungs were bursting... Houdini appeared, dripping but triumphant. The can was revealed, filled to the rim, all its locks intact."

In 1918, the film industry was still in its infancy. But Houdini was not; at age 44 he was uncertain how much longer he could leap from bridges and squirm from straitjackets. So in June of that year the performer made his move into film with a character called the Master Detective. In this series of stories the detective, named Quentin Locke, fought peril and saved damsels through great stunts, and of course, great escapes.

"The plots were ludicrous and the acting wooden," Brandon reported of Houdini's films. Still, they showcased Houdini the way his public wanted to see him. And, importantly, each magic

routine or stunt was shown as "real," with no camera tricks or editing to enhance the Master Detective's mastery. Other films followed, with varying degrees of financial and critical success.

## **The Spirit World Beckoned**

Houdini's varied career would take another turn. "After the death of his mother in 1913," as Steve and Patricia Hanson related in a Los Angeles magazine article, the illusionist "became obsessed with `making contact with those who had gone beyond.'" This venture brought the performer into contact with another notable figure of turn-of-the-century pop culture--Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.

The association--and eventual bitter breakup--of Houdini and Doyle began as far back as 1908, when as a publicity stunt Houdini wrote a letter to "Holmes," asking for help in catching scalawags who were stealing his tricks. By 1920 the two had formed a friendship that seemed connected not only by their talent but by their tragedies--just as Houdini had lost his beloved mother, Doyle lived in grief over the death of his son, Kingsley, a casualty of World War I. Each man sought to explore spiritualism as a way of making possible contact.

But at one point the friendship began to unravel. Houdini was much more the skeptic than Doyle, and indeed made something of a second career from debunking fraudulent mystics. As the Hansons noted in Los Angeles, "Houdini thought that there was an irrational part of Doyle's psyche that desperately wanted to believe contact with the dead was possible. Doyle thought Houdini's campaign against spiritualism was a `mania.' Thus the feud between the two quickly escalated."

## **The Passing of a Legend**

No evidence of real contact with Houdini's mother was ever recorded. But the specter of his mother's death followed the illusionist until the occasion of his own passing. Even that event has since been clouded by the mythology that always seemed to accompany the magician. For instance, a feature film of Houdini's life, released in 1953, had him perishing in one of his own watery coffins during a performance. One magic expert collected seven different versions of the death.

In reality, the magician, while on tour in Montreal, was relaxing backstage where some college students met him. Always proud of his physique, Houdini had often challenged people to punch him with all their strength in the abdomen. He agreed to let one of the students take a punch. But--reclining on a couch at the moment of contact--Houdini had not yet prepared his muscles for the blows. An injury to the appendix (or perhaps, as Brandon has asserted, an aggravation of an existing appendix problem) left untreated for some days, turned into an attack of peritonitis that struck down Houdini during a performance in Detroit. Rushed to a hospital where the city's finest doctor attended him, Houdini lingered for a few days, then died in the arms of his wife at 1:26 p.m., October 31, 1926--Halloween day.

**Source: "Harry Houdini." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Gale Biography In Context*. Web. 7 Sep. 2012.**