

Harry Houdini (1874 - 1926) Magician

Notable Magician. Although he was born in Budapest, Hungary, on 24 March 1874, Harry Houdini emigrated to the United States with his family during his infancy and settled in Appleton, Wisconsin, which is where he developed an interest in magic. Remembered for his ability to escape from bonds and containers, Houdini is the world's most famous magician, and his name is instantly recognized, although he died over 70 years ago.

Admirer of Robert-Houdin. At the age of seventeen, Ehrich Weiss changed his name to Harry Houdini after Harry Kellar, an American magician, and Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin, from whom Houdini took his surname and added the letter "I." Houdini offered an explanation for this in Milbourne Christopher's book *Houdini: The Untold Story*, "From the moment I began to study the art he became my guide and hero," Houdini had written. "I asked nothing more of life than to become in my profession like Robert-Houdin."

First Exposure to Magic. Houdini's father, Mayer Samuel Weiss, rabbi for the German Zion Jewish Congregation, took him to see a touring magician, Dr. Lynn, who used a butcher knife to cut off the arm, leg, and head of a victim in a cabinet. The act mesmerized the young Houdini.

Supported His Family. At the age of 12, Houdini ran away from home to find a job and help support his family. When he returned, he greeted his mother with "Shake me; I'm magic." As his mother shook him, coins flew from his body; this was Houdini's first magic trick. After having rejoined his family, Houdini or "Eric the Great," as he called himself, took several jobs to support his family, but he pursued his interest in magic by studying books in his spare time. Always a reader, two books would alter his life: *Revelations of a Spirit Medium* by A. Medium exposed the tricks of phony psychics. The second book, *The Memoirs of Robert-Houdin*, was the autobiography of Houdini's mentor and one of the greatest magicians of the day, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin.

Begins Performing in Public. Houdini's father felt his interest in magic was a waste of time, but he died when Houdini was 16 years old, which left him free to pursue his career in show business. Houdini's first performances as "The King of Cards" consisted of card tricks and other simple magic. However, he soon began experimenting with handcuffs and using them in his acts. The performances included shows at amusement parks, beer halls, dime museums, and appearances at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 with his brother Theo as his assistant. (Prior to Theo's arrival, Houdini performed with a young man who worked with him in a tie factory in New York. They called themselves "The Houdini Brothers.")

Gets Married. Houdini met Wilhelmina Beatrice "Bess" Rahner, a struggling singer and dancer, in 1894 and married her two weeks later. Although Bess, Houdini, and his brother, Theo, recalled contradicting stories about Houdini's courtship of Bess, all three agreed about the mothers' reactions. Bess' mother was furious because her Catholic daughter married the son of a rabbi and would not speak to Houdini. Houdini's mother, Cecilia Steiner Weiss, welcomed the newlyweds with open arms. Both mothers were disappointed that they had not witnessed the ceremony, which the couple amended by exchanging their marriage vows again for both a priest and then a rabbi. Bess later joked about this. According to Christopher, she said, "I'm the most married person I know. Three times—and to the same man."

"The Houdinis". Bess replaced Theo in Houdini's act because she could sing, dance, and her light weight enabled her to change places with her husband in an illusion that involved a box. Known as "The Houdinis," Bess and Houdini spent two weeks in October at Barton's Theater in Newport News, Virginia. Three months later the Houdinis performed for Tony Pastor's Theater in New York, which was a great opportunity. According to Christopher, "Pastor's intimate showhouse in the Tammany Building on East 24th Street was a prime spot for a new act to be seen." Much to their disappointment, Pastor reviewed the Houdinis act as "satisfactory and interesting," which was a disappointment for the husband-and-wife team.

Enjoyed Moderate Success. The Houdinis then toured with the Welsh Brothers Circus in Lancaster, Pennsylvania for two seasons and performed a variety of tricks. While Bess sang and danced, Houdini manipulated playing cards, produced an egg from a red-felt bag, changed the color of handkerchiefs by pushing them through a paper tube, yanked two knotted pieces of braid through his neck, and shot a borrowed watch to the center of a target. After some moderate success, Houdini decided to travel to Europe in 1900. He created a sensation in London and traveled throughout Europe for the next five years.

Joined the Society of American Magicians. Houdini joined the Society of American Magicians (S.A.M.) in 1904, an organization established in 1902 by professional and amateur conjurers who shared a common interest in publicizing mystery attractions and sharing their tricks at monthly meetings. Following his return to the United States, S.A.M. elected Houdini to the position of vice president in June of 1908, from which he resigned two weeks later because of two disagreements. "Most members thought he severed his relations with the society because the S.A.M. would not name his *Conjurers' Monthly Magazine* as its official organ," Christopher wrote, "although a S.A.M. yearbook entry was another source of friction." While in Dresden, Germany, Houdini had visited the cemetery where Bosko, the great Italian magician, was buried. Because the grave was unkempt, Houdini purchased the plot and sent the deed to S.A.M. However, they did not credit Houdini for the gesture. "The S.A.M. yearbook noted a member had taken action, but neglected to mention him by name," Christopher explained.

Becomes Active in S.A.M. Houdini and S.A.M eventually reconciled and S.A.M. members unanimously elected Houdini as an honorary member in 1912. Houdini also helped British magicians establish the Magicians Club of London and he was elected president before the initial meeting adjourned. In addition to this presidency, Houdini remained involved with his colleagues: he welcomed local magicians into his dressing room, attended independent magic club meetings, and encouraged them to affiliate with S.A.M. This stimulated the formation of many assemblies of the society throughout the United States.

Elected President of S.A.M. At this time, S.A.M. also elected Houdini as its president, which was a great honor. According to Christopher, "No conjurer before or since has been president of the Society of American Magicians and the Magicians Club of London simultaneously. Harry achieved this dual honor after his unanimous election as president of the S.A.M. at its annual meeting in June [1912]."

Honored by S.A.M. As president of S.A.M., Houdini arranged a benefit performance at the Hippodrome, along with the Junior Patriots of America, for the wives and families of the men who lost their lives on the torpedoed U.S. transport *Antilles*. At the end of Houdini's third term as president of the S.A.M., the society members presented him with a red and gold insignia rimmed with thirty small diamonds and emeralds that represented the eyes of two snakes that circled around the society's acronym S.A.M. S.A.M usually waited until the end of a reign to present the president with a medal, but they made an exception for Houdini. Christopher explained the medal's significance. "Perhaps they thought it would be a lifetime job. They presented him with the most elaborate award the society ever made," he wrote. S.A.M. presented Houdini with a miniature half-length portrait of his mother at a banquet in recognition of his seventh term as president.

Houdini's Ten Greatest Illusions. Although Houdini performed hundreds of illusions, Doug Henning, author of *Houdini: His Legend and His Magic*, cites ten illusions as Houdini's greatest. These are: "Metamorphosis", the "Challenge Handcuff Act", the "Naked Test Prison Escape", the "Straitjacket Escape", the "Overboard Box Escape", the "Milk Can Escape", the "Needle Trick", "Walking through a Brick Wall", the "Chinese Water Torture Cell", and the "Vanishing Elephant". Together with Bess, Houdini presented "Metamorphosis" at the conclusion of their act. Houdini walked through the audience and used code words to cue Bess, who was blindfolded, of various objects that the audience members took from their pockets or purses.

The "Challenge Handcuff Act". Houdini incorporated handcuffs into his act early on in his career when he was performing with his brother Theo. Houdini had learned that the majority of cuffs opened with the same key, which motivated him to add a challenge to his act, which he called the "Challenge Handcuff Act". Houdini

invited his audience members to bring their own handcuffs to his performances, which he ensured them he could escape.

The "Naked Prison Test Escape". Prison escapes always cause an uproar, which is why Houdini staged them as publicity stunts. In fact, "even if a known criminal escapes from jail, he somehow becomes a momentary hero in the eyes of the public. Houdini exploited the public feeling about prisons and turned it into newspaper headlines in each city he played," according to Henning. In the "Naked Prison Test Escape", for example, Houdini was stripped, searched, and locked in a prison cell, while his clothes were locked in another. In 21 minutes, he escaped, dressed, switched eight prisoners around, and appeared in the warden's office.

The "Straitjacket Escape". After having visited an insane asylum in St. John, New Brunswick in 1896, where he witnessed an inmate struggling in a straitjacket, Houdini realized that the "Straitjacket Escape", which became one of his most fantastic feats, would act as another great publicity stunt. To free himself from the straitjacket, one legend claims that Houdini escaped by dislocating his shoulder in order to obtain some slack. The more likely legend claims that Houdini escaped by expanding his chest and straining against the body straps as they were fastened, which also created slack. Houdini's skill and physical stamina outweighed the mystery affiliated with the feat. According to Henning, "Houdini's escape from a regulation straitjacket of the types used on the murderous insane was one of his most spectacular feats. It was also less of a mystery than anything he did."

The "Overboard Box Escape". In the "Overboard Box Escape", Houdini was manacled and nailed into a packing box weighted with 200 pounds of lead, which was lowered into the East River in New York. Although Houdini was lowered into the water from a tugboat, he had originally planned to be thrown from the pier of the river. "On July 7, 1912, a huge crowd gathered to witness this death-defying escape, but the New York Police were reluctant to allow a vaudeville performer to commit suicide from one of their piers," Henning wrote. Although the stunt was death defying, death was not part of the act. Houdini escaped in 57 seconds.

The "Milk Can Escape". Houdini debuted the "Milk Can Escape" on January of 1908, which introduced an element of danger to his magical act. Houdini submerged himself into a galvanized iron can, which was filled with 22 pailfuls of water. As Houdini climbed into the can, he proposed an informal wager with the audience. According to Henning, "Houdini would *suggest* an informal contest with the audience. He invited them to see how long they could hold their breath underwater, demonstrating that he could hold his breath longer than a normal man." Houdini remained underwater 1.5 minutes. Shortly thereafter he emerged only to be handcuffed and submerged again. The can was filled to the brim with water once again. After three minutes, Houdini emerged dripping wet and free of the handcuffs.

The "Chinese Torture Cell Escape". Houdini's Chinese torture cell was made of mahogany and looked like a large telephone booth. The front plate was a glass panel and the cell held more than a ton of water. Houdini was lowered into the cell upside down, and his ankles were locked with scissor-like stocks. The "Chinese Torture Cell Escape" was an important part of Houdini's act for 15 years. Henning explained, "Houdini created such an escape with his Chinese Water Torture Cell and it was to remain a regular feature of his programs for the duration of his career. It combined the thrilling underwater feature of the milk can with building of suspense as time ran out."

The "Needle Trick". Houdini performed the "Needle Trick" throughout the duration of his career. A committee examined Houdini's hands and mouth, and he proceeded to swallow 400 to 500 needles strung on thread and then bring them back up, still threaded. Houdini gauged the number of needles he swallowed according to the size of his audience. At the Hippodrome, for instance, he swallowed 10 feet of thread and 200 needles. Moreover, at the Hippodrome, according to Henning, Houdini "presented the needle trick with great audience impact..." At the Berlin Winter Garden, Houdini swallowed 110 feet of thread and 100 needles.

"Walking Through a Brick Wall". Although it was not an original illusion, "Walking Through a Brick Wall"

magnified Houdini's legend by making him "the man who walked through walls." To maximize the believability of the illusion, Houdini had bricklayers build a nine-foot wall on stage, which rested on a steel beam. In a white smock, Houdini stood on one side of the wall where a small three-fold screen surrounded him. Conversely, a similar screen was placed on the opposite side of the wall, where he eventually appeared. Henning explained Houdini's performance: "Houdini would wave his hands above the screen, shouting 'Here I am.' The hands would disappear behind the screen as he shouted, 'Now I'm going.' The screen that had hidden Houdini was removed and he was gone." The screen on the opposite side was removed and Houdini stood smiling.

The "Vanishing Elephant". According to Henning, "Houdini's publicity boasted that he presented the largest, smallest and the most perplexing mystery in the world and history of magic." The largest, which is the "Vanishing Elephant", remains a mystery to magic historians today. In the act, Houdini's 10,000 pound elephant, Jenni, walks into an empty cabinet, which has doors on the back and curtains on the front. Two seconds later, the Elephant disappears. When asked how he had performed the disappearing act, Houdini routinely replied with "even the elephant doesn't know how it was done," according to Henning. Houdini debuted this trick on 7 January 1918 and performed it for 19 weeks, which was the longest life of any act in his career.

Film Career. From 1916-1923, Houdini produced five major silent films, including *The Master Mystery*, *The Grim Game*, *Terror Island*, and *The Man from Beyond*. Later, Houdini was the first magician to be given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his contribution to the film industry.

Writings. Houdini wrote many articles and books on magic and psychic frauds. These included "The Right Way to Do Wrong," an expose on cheats, "A Magician Among the Spirits," an expose on psychic frauds, and *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*.

An Untimely Death. The tale of Houdini's death is as intriguing as the legend himself. While sitting in his dressing room in Montreal, Quebec on 22 October 1926 where he was lecturing about spiritualism, several students from McGill University asked Houdini if he could withstand a blow to the stomach. This was a challenge Houdini accepted. Before he could prepare by tightening his stomach muscles, however, one of the students, J. Gordon Whitehead, hit him three times. Houdini did not know it, but his appendix had ruptured. Although he recovered and performed shortly thereafter in Montreal and Detroit, he later fell ill from streptococcus peritonitis, an inflammation of the abdominal cavity. By the time Houdini saw a physician, he was beyond help. He died on 31 October 1926 with his wife at his side. According to Christopher, "Bess leaned over and put her arms around him. His eyes, which had been closed, opened. He saw her tears. Then his eyes slowly closed again."

A Fitting Tribute. Until Houdini's death, S.A.M. had no funeral rites. Houdini's untimely death inspired a ritual that is now a tradition. According to Christopher, S.A.M. members chanted, "The curtain has at last been rung down. The wand is broken. God touched him with a wondrous gift and our brother made use of it. Now the wand is broken." Just as Houdini purchased the deed to Bosko's grave, S.A.M. pays the annual fees for the maintenance of Houdini's plot. This is "a repayment, in a sense, of the fees Houdini paid in his lifetime for the upkeep of the graves of other famous magicians," according to Christopher.

Further Reading:

Christopher, Milbourne. *Houdini: the Untold Story*. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969).

Henning, Doug. *Houdini: His Legend and His Magic*. (New York: The New York Times Book Co., Inc., 1977).