



My Drift

Title: Harry Houdini

Written by: Jerry D. Petersen

Date: 15 May 2017

Article Number: 258-2017-14

Harry Houdini was the greatest magician and escape artist ever. There is very little argument about that fact.

The Great Harry Houdini BIO (Condensed)



Harry Houdini was born on March 24, 1874 in Budapest, Hungary, with the name of Ehrich Weisz. He was one of six children and the son of Rabbi Mayer Weisz and his second wife, Cecilia Steiner. In 1876, Mayer Weisz immigrated to the United States with the dream of a better life. He found work as a rabbi and changed his last name to Weiss. In 1878, the remainder of the family joined him in the United States.

On October 28, 1883, nine-year-old Ehrich made his first appearance on stage, performing a trapeze act. He billed himself, "Ehrich, the Prince of the Air." At 12, Ehrich hopped a freight car and ran away from home. A year later he returned to New York and continued to help support his family by working as a messenger, necktie cutter, and photography assistant. Nothing is known of his year away from his family.

About this time, Ehrich and his brother Theo began to pursue an interest in magic. As a stage name, Ehrich Weiss became Harry Houdini by adding an “i” to the last name of his idol, French magician Robert Houdin. Harry is simply an Americanized version of his nickname, Ehrie. At 17, Ehrich, now known as Harry Houdini, left his family to pursue his magic career. By the age of twenty, Harry had been performing small acts throughout New York. He soon married Wilhelmina Beatrice "Bess" Rahner and they joined a circus where they began to develop and perfect his escape tricks.

Through the years, Houdini gained fame after repeatedly escaping from police handcuffs and jails. Harry was even given certificates from various wardens for escaping from their prisons. After making his name in America, Harry toured Europe, where he expanded his repertoire by escaping from straitjackets and coffins. Eventually, Harry was able to accomplish his dream of having a full show dedicated to his magic.

In his later years, Harry took his talent to the film arena, where he both acted and started his own film laboratory called The Film Development Corporation. Years later, Harry would receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In addition, Harry showed interest in the field of aviation and may have been the first person to ever fly over Australian soil.

In the 1920s, Harry became interested in the occult, specifically in debunking mediums and psychics. His training in magic helped him expose frauds that scientists and academics could not. He chronicled his time investigating the occult in his book, *A Magician Among the Spirits*.



Houdini was buried in Machpelah Cemetery in Queens, N.Y.

In 1926 Houdini died as a result of a ruptured appendix, after suffering a blow to the abdomen by university student J. Gordon Whitehead. Houdini refused to seek medical help and continued to travel, eventually succumbing to Peritonitis on October 31, 1926 at the age of 52.

Harry Houdini



Houdini in 1899

Born	Ehrich Weisz March 24, 1874 Budapest, Austria-Hungary
Died	October 31, 1926 (aged 52) Detroit, Michigan, U.S.
Cause of death	Peritonitis
Occupation	Illusionist, magician, escapologist, stunt performer, actor, historian, film producer, pilot, debunker
Height/Weight	5'5" – Weight is unknown
Years active	1891–1926
Spouse(s)	Wilhelmina Beatrice "Bess" Rahner (m. 1894; his death 1926)
Relatives	Theodore Hardeen (brother)

Signature

Harry Houdini



Harry Houdini



Bess Houdini

Now for the most interesting part of this article –

Harry Houdini's 9 Greatest Stunts

#9 Escape from Murderer's Row Jail



In 1906, Houdini attempted an escape from the South Wing of Washington D.C.'s Old Jail, also known as Murderer's Row. Guards stripped Houdini of all his clothes and placed them in another locked cell nearby before cuffing Houdini and shutting him in.

Two minutes later, he was free. Houdini's stunt didn't end there, though. Before grabbing his clothes, he opened the doors to eight other locked cells, switched the prisoners around, and locked the doors again. Houdini's entire escape from Murderer's Row reportedly took 21 minutes.

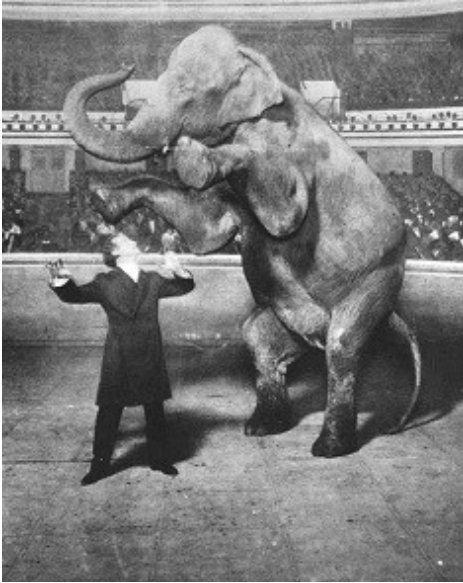
In this gross-out performance, Houdini would swallow 50 to 100 needles and 20 yards of thread. After presenting his empty mouth to the audience, the magician would then reach inside his throat and promptly pull out every needle, fully threaded together.

#8 East Indian Needle Trick



Despite pulling off plenty of insane physical feats in his lifetime, this was not one of them. Houdini accomplished this illusion with some careful mouth-maneuvering and plenty of practice. The threaded needles were kept hidden in a bunch between his lower lips and teeth, and were swapped with the unthreaded needles and thread after appearing to swallow them. All Houdini had to do was cover the hidden prop with his fingers when he spread his mouth for the audience's inspection.

#7 The Vanishing Elephant



Not willing to settle for simply disappearing rabbits, on January 7, 1918, Houdini attempted to perform a vanishing act on an elephant. The illusion, performed at New York's Hippodrome Theater, involved a massive wooden cabinet and a 10,000-pound elephant named Jennie. After displaying the full interior of the cabinet to the Hippodrome's audience, Houdini walked Jennie into the wooden structure and shut its doors and curtains. After a moment's pause, the cabinet was reopened and rotated, showing the whole audience that Jennie had completely vanished.

How did he pull it off? Unsurprisingly, sitting far away from a spinning, dark box doesn't give you the best look inside. Houdini had handlers waiting inside the cabinet to throw a dark tarp over Jennie, and rotated the structure quickly enough that no one caught a glimpse of the vague elephant-like shape inside.

Houdini performed many variations of box escapes throughout his career. One of the most notable was the Overboard Box Escape on July 7, 1912. After placing manacles on his hands and feet, assistants placed Houdini in a wooden crate that they proceeded to nail shut. Just to top things off, the box was then bound with rope and weighed down with 200 pounds of lead before being dropped into New York's East River. Houdini required 57 seconds to escape.

#6 Overboard box escape



Houdini performed this escape many times, and even performed a version on stage, first at Hamerstein's Roof Garden where a 5,500-US-gallon (21,000 liters) tank was specially built, and later at the New York Hippodrome.

#5 Suspended Straightjacket Escape



Houdini introduced his famous straightjacket escape into his regular act after witnessing an insane asylum patient struggling inside one while visiting Canada.

Having his hands restrained inside the jacket meant that Houdini could not escape nearly as easily as he could from handcuffs, and instead relied on his whole body to obtain slack and wiggle free. Houdini focused on first bringing his arms to the front of his body, sometimes needing to dislocate his shoulder in order to do so. From here, he used his teeth to loosen the jacket's straps.



Houdini would make his escape in full view of the assembled crowd. In many cases, Houdini drew tens of thousands of onlookers who brought city traffic to a halt. Houdini would sometimes ensure press coverage by performing the escape from the office building of a local New York City newspaper.

Houdini learned to escape so skillfully that he began performing the act for audiences while hung upside down and bound at the ankles, eventually cutting his escape time from 30 minutes down to three.

#4 Milk Can Escape



Houdini once referred to his Milk Can feat as "the best escape that I have ever invented." In the act, first performed in 1901, assistants locked a handcuffed Houdini inside a cramped metal milk can filled to the brim with water. Before entering the can, Houdini asked the audience to hold their breath along with him as he attempted to escape. Two minutes later, he was out, and his audience was out of breath.

#3 Buried Alive

Houdini performed at least three variations of a buried alive stunt during his career. The first was near Santa Ana, California in 1915, and it almost cost Houdini his life. Houdini was buried, without a casket, in a pit of earth six feet deep. He became exhausted and panicked while trying to dig his way to the surface and called for help. When his hand finally broke the surface, he became unconscious and had to be pulled from the grave by his assistants. Houdini wrote in his diary that the escape was "very dangerous" and that "the weight of the earth is killing."



Houdini's second variation of buried alive was an endurance test designed to expose mystical Egyptian performer Rahman Bey, who had claimed to use supernatural powers to remain in a sealed casket for an hour. Houdini bettered Bey on August 5, 1926, by remaining in a sealed casket, or coffin, submerged in the swimming pool of New York's Hotel Shelton for one and a half hours. Houdini claimed he did not use any trickery or supernatural powers to accomplish this feat, just controlled breathing.



Houdini's final buried alive stunt was an elaborate stage escape that was featured in his full evening show. Houdini would escape after being strapped in a straitjacket, sealed in a casket, and then buried in a large tank filled with sand.

The bronze casket Houdini created for his buried alive stunts was used to transport Houdini's body from Detroit to New York following his death on Halloween 1926.



#2 London Daily Mirror Newspaper Challenge

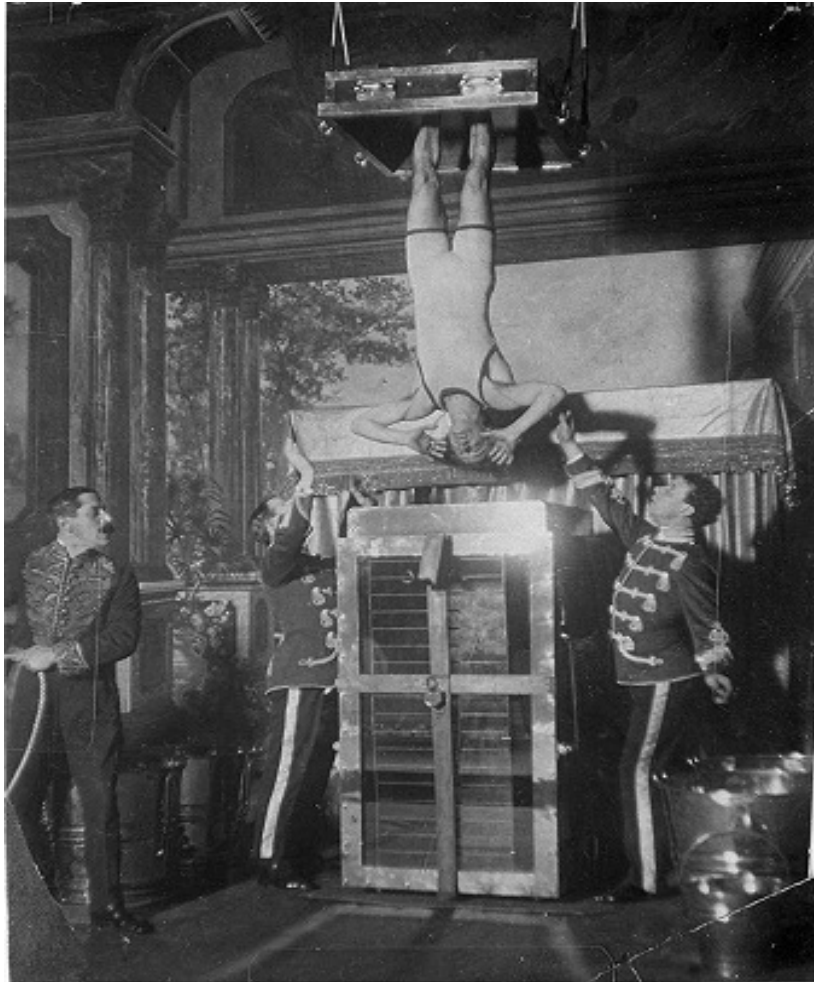


In 1904, the London Daily Mirror newspaper challenged Houdini to escape from special handcuffs that it claimed had taken Nathaniel Hart, a locksmith from Birmingham, five years to make. Houdini accepted the challenge for March 17 during a matinée performance at London's Hippodrome theater. It was reported that 4000 people and more than 100 journalists turned out for the much-hyped event. The escape attempt dragged on for over an hour, during which Houdini emerged from his "ghost house" (a small screen used to conceal the method of his escape) several times. On one occasion, he asked if the cuffs could be removed so he could take off his coat. The Mirror representative, Frank Parker, refused, saying Houdini could gain an advantage if he saw how the cuffs were unlocked. Houdini promptly took out a pen-knife and, holding the knife in his teeth, used it to cut his coat from his body.

Some 56 minutes later, Houdini's wife appeared on stage and gave him a kiss. Many thought that in her mouth was the key to unlock the special handcuffs. However, this theory is unlikely due to the size of the 6-inch key required to unlock the handcuffs plus the fact that this key was under heavy guard at the time. Houdini then went back behind the curtain and after an hour and ten minutes, Houdini emerged free. As he was paraded on the shoulders of the cheering crowd, he broke down and wept. Houdini later said it was the most difficult escape of his career.



#1 Chinese Water Torture Cell



The greatest and most sensational of all Houdini's escapes was without doubt his "Chinese Water Torture Cell." In this trick, Houdini was to escape an extraordinary contraption resembling a fish tank. This is filled with water while Houdini is placed head down, in full view of the audience. His feet are manacled and when the tank is covered it is difficult to imagine how he can possibly escape. But escape he does. It was, in a sense, a "double challenge" —first, to the audience to solve and second to his imitators to try to design something even half as wonderful. During his lifetime and for many years after, he was the only man to perform the escape from the Water Torture Cell., or anything quite like it. With all its seeming danger, and the definite difficulties it presented, Houdini never failed in the escape.

An assistant would always keep an axe handy just in case Houdini failed to escape and the glass had to be broken. No illusions here.

[A few closing items](#)

It was mentioned in the condensed BIO that Harry Houdini's occupations were Illusionist, magician, escapologist, stunt performer, actor, film producer, pilot, and debunker. We pretty much covered illusionist, magician, escapologist, and stunt performer. Let's take a quick look at those other occupations:

Movie Career (Actor and Film Producer)

In 1906, Houdini started showing films of his outside escapes as part of his vaudeville act. In Boston, he presented a short film called "Houdini Defeats Hackenschmidt." Georg Hackenschmidt was a famous wrestler of the day.

Houdini starred in and/or produced five full-length movies:

- The Master Mystery (1918)
- The Grim Game (1919)
- Terror Island (1920)
- The Man from Beyond (1921)
- Haldane of the Secret Service (1923)



Remember, back in the early 1900s, all movies were silent. Neither Houdini's acting career nor his film producing company found much success so he gave up on the movie business in 1923, complaining that "the profits are too meager".

Aviator

In 1909, Houdini became fascinated with aviation. He purchased a French Voisin biplane for \$5,000 and hired a full-time mechanic, Antonio Brassac. After crashing once, he made his first successful flight on November 26 in Hamburg, Germany. The following year, Houdini toured Australia. He brought along his Voisin biplane with the intention to be the first person in Australia to fly.



Houdini's French Voisin Biplane

On March 18, 1910, he made three flights at Diggers Rest, Victoria, near Melbourne. It was reported at the time that this was the first aerial flight in Australia. However, Australian historians say that the first powered flight in Australia took place at Bolivar in South Australia; the aircraft was a Bleriot monoplane with Fred Custance as the pilot. This flight took place on March 17, 1910 – One day before Houdini.

Debunking Spiritualists

Aside from his extensive career as an illusionist, Houdini spent much of his later years going after other illusionists posing as mediums and spiritualists. In 1924, Scientific American offered a \$2,500 cash prize to any individual who could demonstrate real psychic abilities. Boston medium Mina Crandon, referred to as “Margery” by her followers, passed every psychic test that Scientific American's review board threw at her, nearly convincing them to hand over the full prize before Houdini requested that he test her himself.



Medium Mina Crandon

During Margery's seance, Houdini immediately noticed her subtly twitching to manipulate the table and other objects. “I’ve got her,” he said after the seance. “All fraud. Every bit of it.” A few months later, Houdini produced a pamphlet detailing how Margery performed every one of her psychic illusions.

There have not been many people that ever lived on Earth who have done the things Harry Houdini did. Probably none! I can tell you one thing, I would never ever attempt to do any of his escape stunts especially the one where he is buried alive. That is one of my greatest fears.

**Bigdrifter44@gmail.com
Bigdrifter.com**