# Harry Houdini: Master of illusion and Escape

Possibly the most famous performer of the early 20th century, Harry Houdini was born Erich Weiss on April 6, 1874 in Budapest, Hungary. His family emigrated to the United States and settled in Appleton, Wis., where his father served as a rabbi.

            Details of his early life are sketchy, obscured for the most part by Houdini's conflicting and fanciful tales of his youth. But it is known that Erich left home at the age of 12, and later rejoined his family in New York where he drifted into a career as an illusionist and escape artist. He adapted the name of the great French magician Robert Houdin for his own stage name.

      As a master of illusion, Houdini knew how to trick his audience. One of his greatest tricks was turning his jump from the old Belle Isle Bridge into a legend that has all but replaced the facts of event.

      In November 1906, Houdini came to Detroit for a two-week engagement at the Temple Theater. Houdini regularly performed publicity stunts to fill the theaters he was playing, and Detroit was no exception.

      On Nov. 27, 1906, a front-page story in The Detroit News told the story of what really happened:

**Handcuff King Jumps Manacled From Bridge**

**Handcuff King Houdini Performs Remarkable Feat and Comes Out Safely**

**Had a Rope Tied Around his Waist and Tied to Bridge to Safeguard Against Accidents**

*Tied to a lifeline a hundred and thirteen feet long, handcuffed with two of the best and latest model handcuffs in the possession of the Detroit police department, nerved by the confidence of a lion in his own powers ... Houdini, the wonder worker at the Temple Theater, leaped from the draw span of the Belle Isle Bridge at 1 o'clock this afternoon, freed himself from the handcuffs while under water, then swam to a waiting lifeboat, passed over the unlocked and open cuffs and clambered aboard.*

      But Houdini and his publicists greatly embellished the story. The told a tale of Houdini jumping into a hole cut into the ice of a frozen river. After freeing himself from his chains, the story goes, Houdini found himself swept by the current far away from hole in the ice. According to this myth, Houdini swam around looking for the hole, breathing air trapped between the water and the covering ice.

      In fact, the Detroit River was quite free of ice on Nov. 27 and the temperature, although cold, was above freezing. Houdini later changed the date to Dec. 2. In one account, he said the whole event took place in Pittsburgh where he was not only handcuffed but also locked inside a trunk.

      Whatever the reality, Houdini's tall tale is the one known by most people. A 1952 movie about Houdini, used the tale to great dramatic effect, with Tony Curtis swimming about under the ice for eight suspense-filled minutes. Houdini would have been pleased with the illusion.

      Almost 20 years after his 1906 exploit, Houdini returned to Detroit to die.

      Before coming to Detroit for an engagement at the Garrick Theater, Houdini was performing in Montreal. There, a McGill student called Whitehead, took Houdini up on his brag that he was in such excellent physical condition a that he could easily "take" any punch to his stomach.

      Whitehead delivered at least four very severe body blows before he was stopped. At first, Houdini ignored the pain. He performed four, two-and-a-half-hour shows before closing in Montreal and heading for Detroit.

      His distraught wife, Bess, telegraphed ahead to Detroit to have the best doctor in the city ready to see him when they arrived. Still, Houdini went on with the show and performed at the Garrick with a 104-degree temperature.

Dr. Charles S. Kennedy later said:

      "His appendix had ruptured and his system was filled with staphylococcus germs. The rupture apparently occurred the day before. But the amazing part of it was that Houdini had been able to perform his act at the Garrick. He was a perfect physical specimen, one of the strongest men I had ever examined."

      After the show at the Garrick, Houdini was admitted to old Grace Hospital, Room 401.

      "He fully understood the gravity of his condition," said Dr. Kennedy, "and accepted it gracefully. He was a perfect gentleman and patient."

      Houdini told Dr. Kennedy about his disbelief in spiritualism and about the promise he had made to try to communicate with his friends after his death. "I am nothing but a fake," he said, "while you (Dr. Kennedy) do great things for your fellow man."

      But there was little Dr. Kennedy could do for Houdini, who died on Oct. 31, 1926, at 1:26 p.m., age 52, calling the name of Col. Robert Ingersoll, an agnostic lecturer.

      "It is the only case of traumatic appendicitis I had ever seen in my lifetime," Dr. Kennedy said, "but the logic of the thing seemed to indicate that Mr. Houdini died of appendicitis, the direct result of the injury."

      Houdini had waged a personal crusade to expose any fake spiritualist he came upon. But he made the secret code pact with his wife, Bess, that if he died, she would be able to know by the code if he really contacted her from the "beyond."

      On Jan. 9, 1929, The Detroit News reported that Bess and had indeed recieved the secret code signal during a seance.

      According to the story:

*"Please, everyone, keep both feet flat on the floor."*

*Mrs. Houdini appeared to be asleep. A convulsive twitching started the talk with the control spirit guide, "Fletcher."*

*"Hello, Hello, Fletcher, This man is coming now...' he says, "Hello, Bess, my sweetheart. He says it is the code you and he used in the mind reading act."*

*"First of all he says the word Rosabelle.' Do you remember all that it stands for?"*

*"Oh, yes," the plaintive little figure on the couch answered. She courageously sang the words of the song, "Rosabelle! Sweet Rosabelle, I love you more than I can tell; Over me, you've cast a spell I love you, my sweet Rosabelle"*

*Fletcher went on: "He is smiling now. He is showing me a picture with two curtains...I draw the curtain so ... then the secret code of ten words: l. Pray, 2. Answer, 3. Talk, 4. Then, 5. Tell, 6. Will, 7. Hurry, 8. Listen, 9. Look, 10. Hear.*

*In the code, each numeral represents a letter of the alphabet: A is 1, B is 2, C is 3 and so on. Beyond 10, the numbers would be doubled. Worked out, the first word answer is B, tell is 3, pray answer is L, look is I, answer is V, and tell is E: "BELIEVE".*

*"The message that I want to give to my wife is: 'Believe, Rosabelle, Believe!' Is that right?", the control asked.*

*"Yes, it is right," Mrs. Houdini answered.*

      But Mrs. Houdini later said she was ill during the seance, When she recovered, she said she no longer believed the message came from Harry. She said the secret code may have been known by others and was therefore suspect.

      Other seances were attempted on the Halloween anniversary of his death. But Bess gave up in 1936. She said ten years was long enough to wait for any man. Besides, she said, the secret code had been revealed making further seances pointless.

      Mrs. Houdini died February 11, 1943 at age 67, on a train from Los Angeles to the East Coast.

      Before her death, Bess told friends that if a medium ever announced a message from her, it would be a fraud.

      "When I go," she said, "I'll be gone for good. I won't ever try to come back."