

The World's Greatest Escape Artist

# Harry Houdini

- Yaakov Astor

*No chain, cell, safe or chest could hold him. Thousands and thousands of spectators around the world thronged to his fantastic performances, watching openmouthed as he freed himself from every sort of confinement and restraint. Houdini did not possess any superhuman skills. He was simply a master at pulling off tricks that others could not fathom. Learn more about this extraordinary Jewish magician who became a legend in his own time.*



The new safe stood on the stage of the Euston Palace Theatre in London. Its door was swung wide open. Harry Houdini, the young American magician, got ready to step inside. He was wearing only a bathing suit.

London newspapers had printed these bold headlines: "Houdini Challenges Safe Maker. Offers to Escape from Safe Before Theatre Audience." The year was 1904.

The people watching from the audience were excited. "The air in the safe will last only a few minutes," one man said.

"He'll die if he doesn't get out fast!"

"It's impossible! How could anyone escape from a locked safe?"

"Houdini can!"

On the stage Houdini shook hands with men who had come up from the audience. They had looked over the safe to make sure it was in good working order. A doctor had examined Houdini. He had even asked the magician to open his mouth. "No tools!" he told the audience. "Nothing on him!"

"Then," Houdini said, shaking hands with the last man, "let me enter the safe. Lock the door behind me!"

The heavy steel door clanged shut. A screen was placed around the safe. As the men left the stage, the orchestra played soft music. The audience settled back in their seats to wait. They watched the screen.

A half hour passed. The people began to grow restless.

"How can he possibly get out?" a woman asked.

One man thought he knew the answer. "Houdini isn't like the rest of us," he whispered. "He has supernatural powers! He can change himself into a spirit and slip between the cracks of the door—just like smoke!"

The woman looked at him. "I don't believe that!"

"Believe me," the man said, turning away. "It's true!"

Forty minutes passed. "Open the door!" someone yelled. "He's dead and can't get out!" A woman screamed and fainted.

Forty-five minutes. People were whistling and stamping. A man stood and shook

his fist. "Let him out! He needs help!"

At that moment, Houdini stepped out from behind the screen. A great sigh swept through the audience.

"There he is!"

"He's alive!"

Men rushed onto the stage to inspect the safe. "The door is locked!"

Houdini smiled and bowed to the cheering people.

How had he escaped from a steel safe? No one in the audience that night guessed the answer. The fact was that Houdini had escaped in just 14 minutes. He had been sitting behind the screen for almost a half hour while the audience's excitement grew.

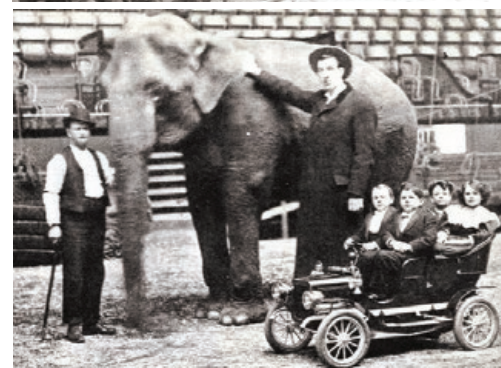
## A Magician Is Born

Harry Houdini is still widely considered the greatest escape artist in history. Some people thought he was born with magical powers. But this was not true, of course. He became a master magician only after long years of hard work. In fact, he began working toward this goal when he was a boy.

His real name was Erik Weisz (changed later to Ehrich Weiss). The third of five children, he was born in 1874 in Budapest, Hungary, to Jewish parents, Mayer Samuel and Cecilia Weiss. Shortly after Ehrich's birth, Samuel Weiss brought his family to America. They made their home in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Samuel Weiss accepted a position in Appleton's Zion Congregation (Reform), a loosely organized group of 15 families who had left revolution-torn Central Europe 25 years earlier. His congregation was small and couldn't pay enough to support his wife and children. As they grew up, Ehrich and his brothers had to earn money for the family by shining shoes and selling newspapers.

The famous Barnum and Bailey circus band came to Appleton every year. Arriving with pomp and parades, and offering an array of amazing shows and mystifying feats, the circus captured everyone's imagination. Many young people like Ehrich dreamed of joining the circus one day. It is



The world-famous Barnum & Bailey Circus that sparked in young Ehrich (Harry Houdini) the dream of becoming a performer.

not surprising that when he wasn't working or going to school, Ehrich practiced doing tricks. At the age of nine, he hung ropes from a tree branch in his backyard. Then he tied a wooden bar to the ropes. He learned to do such good stunts on the homemade trapeze that one of his friends asked him to be in his five-cent circus. Feeling like a real circus star, Ehrich called himself "The Prince of the Air." He loved the clapping and cheering of the boys and girls who watched him.

He also practiced rope escapes. He put his hands behind his back and let friends tie his wrists together with a rope. After a few minutes, he held up the rope. His friends were all amazed! How had he escaped? Ehrich only smiled. He had already learned the first rule of being a magician: Never reveal how you do a trick!

Mother Weiss was amazed at another trick her son had learned. Pieces of her apple cake began to disappear, so she hid the cake in a cupboard and locked the door. The cake still vanished. One day, after several cakes had disappeared, she found out where they

went. Her son had a new interest—picking locks. The small lock on her cupboard door was easy to open with a bent piece of wire.

"That doesn't surprise me!" the town locksmith said. He had heard about Ehrich's trick. "That boy has been coming to my shop for weeks. He can pick any lock in the place!"

In 1887, when Ehrich was 13, his father moved the family to New York. There were more Jews there, and he hoped to start a small religious school. But he became ill and could do nothing to support his wife and five children.

To help his sick father, Ehrich took whatever jobs he could find. One day, as he walked along the street, he came upon a line of boys in front of a small factory—H. Richter's Sons. A sign in the window read: "Assistant necktie cutter wanted."

Ehrich was only 14 years old, but he boldly walked to the head of the line, took the sign off the door and said to the boys, "The job is taken. Thank you for waiting." His bluff worked. He got the job and stayed at H. Richter's Sons for the next two and a half years.

During these years, he practiced magic in his spare time. He did card tricks and escape



The circus arrives in Appleton.