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 man who had come from the audience examined the safe. “The door is locked!”

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

Houdini smiled and bowed to the cheering people.

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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 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.

“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.”

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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 tricks. 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.

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