



PAPER

Bro. Harry Houdini

Summary: Houdini, his life and Masonic Career.

Houdini, or more properly Ehrich Weiss, was born in Budapest on March 24th 1874. He frequently claimed that he was born in Wisconsin in the United States of America, but in fact his parents emigrated from Hungary when he was four years old. Houdini's father was a Rabbi named Mayer Sámuel Weiss, who was for a time the Rabbi for the German Zion Jewish Congregation in Appleton. His mother was Cecília Steiner Weiss, who spoke fluent Yiddish, Hungarian, and German and of course English. The family was quite poor, so most of the seven children began to work at an early age to support the family.

At the age of eight Ehrich sold newspapers and worked as a shoeshine boy. At the age of twelve he left home to find work, then finally joined his father in New York City. It was here that he had his introduction to the world of magic. Houdini began to perform magic as a teenager calling himself 'Eric the Great'. It was at this time that he read the autobiography of one of the greatest magicians of the day, The memoirs of Jean Eugene Robert Houdin, a Frenchman. He was so impressed that he took his name, adding the letter 'i' to become Houdini.

As an adult, Houdini was somewhat shorter than average, about 5' 4", with blue eyes, dark curly hair, and rather a careless appearance. Yet his face seemed to project a handsome, burning intensity. He was immensely strong both in mind and body. Through exercise and balanced living, he developed his physical state to an amazing degree of fitness with muscles of steel and a determination of mind to match. As an outstanding swimmer he also developed an extended underwater breath control technique, that proved to be essential in later years as an 'escape artist'.

On 22nd June 1894, Houdini married Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner (known as Bess), who was a Catholic. This union, which caused distress and friction in his Jewish family, was destined to be a most happy relationship.



Harry Houdini c. 1905

He spent years learning the mechanics of locks and handcuffs, becoming an expert in the field. A master of opening secure devices of all types, he possessed a skill the likes of which has not been seen since, and is likely never to be seen again. Additionally, Houdini brought charisma and sheer magnetism to his presentations, mesmerizing his audiences until they believed in his apparent miracles. The publicity that he created to enhance his image with the most extravagant methods of presentation and claims was outstanding, and he became the highest paid vaudeville entertainer of his era.

Some even attributed his legendary escapes to occult or supernatural powers. In fact, after the death of Houdini's mother, to whom he was devoted, he focused his attention on the thriving business of spiritualism. He was outraged by the victimisation of the bereaved, and began to expose the spiritual charlatans who appeared to be able to contact the dead. Despite his scepticism, Houdini and his wife Bess, devised a secret code to test the validity of any so-called spirit message coming from either of them should they pass away. The code was based on the name Rosabelle, the inscription upon Bess' wedding ring. For ten years after his death, Bess conducted a séance every year on the anniversary of his death. However, it is understood that no contact has ever been made.

Houdini began to offer rewards to anyone who could successfully restrain him, first in handcuffs, and later in all manner of objects: leg irons, straightjackets, jails, prison cells, a mail pouch, packing crates, an iron boiler, and coffins. The most famous being the water torture cell, in which, locked and shackled, he was lowered head-first into a water filled Chamber. The audience sat transfixed, watching him through the glass front, knowing that unless escape was possible within precious minutes, certain death by drowning would result. Houdini was without doubt the most famous magician and escapologist in history.

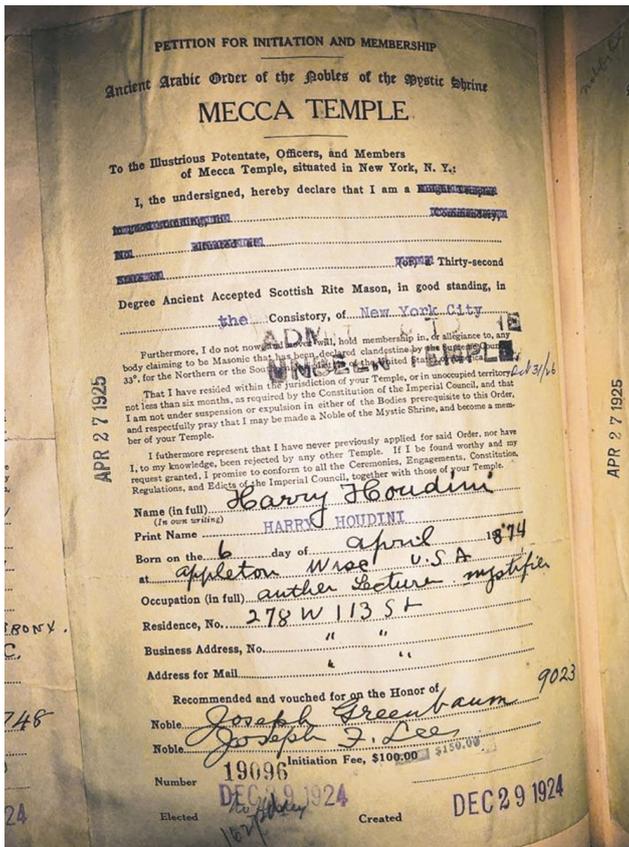
In most of his escapes, usually carried out in full view of his audience, there was never a sign of how he accomplished his release - that too added to the amazement. The magical effect that was to become the cornerstone of his act throughout his life was known as the needle trick. This involved the swallowing of dozens of needles and thread, then the regurgitation of the thread with all the needles neatly threaded on.

In 1918, at the Hippodrome in New York, he performed the largest stage illusion ever by making an elephant disappear. In the following two years, Houdini starred in two movies, then going on to create his own film production company, the *Houdini Picture Corporation*, 1921. He made such films as *The Man from Beyond* and *Haldane of the Secret Service*.

He also became the author of several important books on the subject of magic, including a best seller entitled *A Magician Among the Spirits*, published in 1924.

Houdini owned the famous Martinka magic shop in New York for a while, the birth place of the Society of American Magicians, where he would sit for hours autographing his books for eager fans. Eventually, in 1917, he was elected as President of the Society of American Magicians, a position he held until his death in 1926.

Mr Enrich Weiss (Houdini) was Initiated into St. Cecile Lodge No. 568 (The vaudeville and entertainers Lodge, named after the French Patron Saint of Music) in New York City on 17th July, 1923 at the age of 49.



Houdini's petition to the Mecca Temple.

Courtesy of the Grand Lodge of the State of New York.

He was Passed and Raised later that year and in 1924 entered The Consistory, one of the higher degrees. In December that same year, he became a Shriner in New York's Mecca Temple.

He was immensely proud of his Masonic membership, and gave a benefit performance for the Valley of New York filling a Scottish Rite Cathedral with 4000 seats and raising thousands of dollars for needy Brethren.

On October 22nd 1926, during an engagement at The Princess Theatre in Montreal, a first-year college student asked permission to test the entertainer's abdominal muscle control, and strike the magician, which was often part of his act. Houdini accepted the challenge, mumbled his consent, whereupon the student struck before the necessary muscles could be tensed, obviously a critical requirement. Houdini ignored later stomach pains in the tradition of 'the show must go on'. Arriving at Detroit the next day, he was diagnosed with acute appendicitis, but again insisted upon performing. Finally, with a temperature of 104°F he was taken to Grace Hospital, where a ruptured and gangrenous appendix was removed, but by then

Peritonitis had set in; and on the afternoon of 31st October 1926, he passed to the Grand Lodge above.

To the student of Numerology, it seems quite appropriate that the world's most famous magician should pass away on the year's most magical day, Halloween. Even more intriguing Houdini was 52 years old when he died corresponding to the number of playing cards in a pack. Furthermore, he was born 26 years before the start of the new Century and died 26 years into the next one. As if life's deck had been deftly cut in half by Fate, the ultimate magician.

We end with a fitting tribute written by Bro. William E. Parker (Past Grand Senior Warden of the French National Grand Lodge in Paris):

'As Sherlock Holmes said: 'We reach. We grasp. And what is left in our hands at the end? A shadow.' Sometimes, however, in lieu of fading, the shadow endures and becomes an all pervasive reminder of a unique figure whose larger than life persona lingers on. Houdini's shadow not only endures, but his name has entered into the hallowed realm of legend.'

Author's Note: I dedicate this particular 'Short Talk' to the memory of my Father, Frederick Hollins, British Magical Society Gold Medallist 1945, who performed for many years at The Lord Mayor of Birmingham's Banquet and Ball, and many other prestigious events. He always donated his fees to Masonic Charities.

Bibliography

1. Harper, Paul, Famous Freemasons - A Prologue, <https://solomon.ugle.org.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=2084>

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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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