

HARRY **HOUDINI**
for **KIDS**

**HIS LIFE AND
ADVENTURES**
WITH 21 MAGIC TRICKS
AND ILLUSIONS

**LAURIE
CARLSON**



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carlson, Laurie M., 1952-

Harry Houdini for kids : his life and adventures with 21 magic tricks and illusions / Laurie Carlson.
— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-55652-782-1 (pbk.)

1. Houdini, Harry, 1874-1926—Juvenile literature. 2. Magicians—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 3. Escape artists—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 4. Magic tricks. I. Title.

GV1545.H8C33 2009

793.8092—dc22

[B]

2008021404

Cover and interior design: Joan Sommers Design
Cover image credits: (Left to right) Busch Circus poster, c. 1912. Postcard of the Hippodrome, New York; Private collection. Houdini, bound and chained to a large metal wheel; Photograph courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Harry Houdini; Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZC4-3277.

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First edition

Published by Chicago Review Press, Incorporated

814 North Franklin Street

Chicago, Illinois 60610

978-1-55652-782-1

Printed in Italy

5 4 3 2 1

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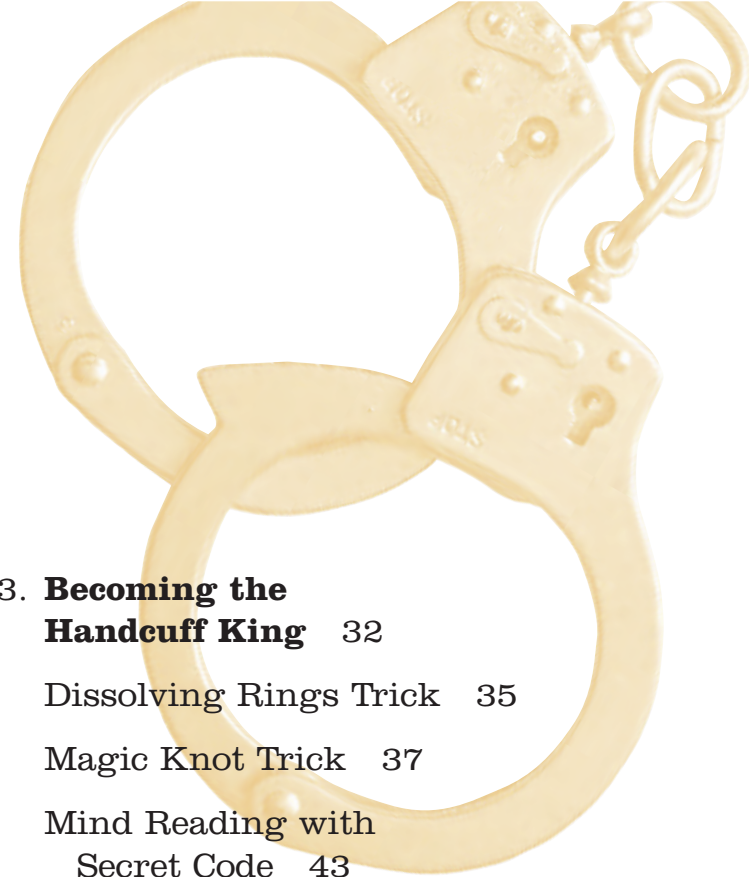
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Humble Beginnings

On March 24, 1874, Ehrich Weisz, the boy who grew up to reinvent himself as Harry Houdini, was born in Budapest, Hungary. His parents quickly had a houseful—they already had three older sons, and another son was born after Ehrich. Their father, Mayer Samuel Weisz, had studied to be a lawyer, but he found little opportunity in Hungary. The family was just getting by and times looked bleak. They were Jewish and many Jews in Europe suffered discrimination and harsh treatment. Like many other immigrants from Europe at that time, Mayer Weisz booked passage on a ship to New York City.

COMING TO AMERICA

In the late 1800s millions of immigrants came to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe. They arrived by ship, usually traveling in family groups,

with everything they owned tied in bundles or trunks. Industrialization in Europe meant that machinery replaced human labor, leaving many people without jobs or farmland. In Russia, masses of Jews left to avoid harsh anti-Jewish government policies. Over 23 million immigrants entered the United States between 1880 and 1920. From 1900 to 1914, a million immigrants arrived every year.

When immigrants got off the ships in the New York harbor, health officers examined them. If they had signs of contagious diseases, they were quarantined, hospitalized, or sent back to Europe. The newcomers stayed in hotels and boardinghouses until they could get settled. Those with money headed west by train to find farmland. The West opened to settlers after the Civil War, and homesteaders could find land of their own along the new railroad lines. Those who were poor

stayed in New York City, looking for work there at factory jobs. In 1879 almost half of the 180,000 immigrants who arrived in New York City stayed there. The rest headed by train to Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Missouri.

This was the path followed by the Weisz family. After arriving in New York City, Mayer Weisz sent for his wife, Cecilia, and their five children. Ehrich was four years old. Cecilia and the boys traveled from the port of Hamburg, Germany, to New York City. It took them 15 days. They arrived the day before the Fourth of July and a stifling 95-degree heat wave.

Hungarian Jewish immigrants, like many others, typically changed their names when they entered the United States, Americanizing them to make them easier for English speakers to pronounce. The Weisz family changed their last name to Weiss. Armin became Herman; Natan became Nathan; Vilmos changed to William; Ehrich changed his to simply Erik, and the youngest, Deszo, became Theo—but they called him Dash. For Ehrich, it wouldn't be the last time he changed his name.

By that fall, the family was living in Appleton, Wisconsin, where Mayer had



found a house and job. Appleton was a small but growing town of 7,000 residents. Grain mills ground wheat into flour, and sawmills turned white pine into paper pulp. There were only about 75 Jewish people in the town, but they planned to build a synagogue and hired Mayer to serve as their rabbi. He was respected because he was highly educated and spoke several languages—Hebrew,

A magazine printed this image of immigrants getting off ships in New York in 1880.

HARPER'S WEEKLY, 1880



Immigrants heading to the train station with piles of belongings. They will head west.

HARPER'S WEEKLY, 1873

Hungarian, and German—and wrote poetry and essays. The family became U.S. citizens and added two more children: another son, Leopold, and finally a daughter, Gladys.

EHRICH GOES TO WORK

Rabbi Weiss was a serious, studious man, far too serious, it seems, for the Appleton

people, who replaced him four years later with a more modern-thinking rabbi. Or at least one who spoke English, which Rabbi Weiss did not. With no money and seven children, the Weisses moved to the nearest city, Milwaukee, to make a go of it. There the children went to work, finding whatever ways to earn money they could. Ehrich bought newspapers and resold them on the streets, polished men's boots for a few cents, or ran errands. They were destitute, and Cecilia had to go to the Hebrew Relief Society to ask for food for the children and coal to heat the house.

One day Ehrich and his younger brother Dash lost nearly their entire day's earnings—two dollars—on the way home. To make up for the loss, Ehrich used their remaining nickel to buy a flower from a florist shop. He went out on the street and sold the flower to a passerby for ten cents—doubling his investment. Dash joined him and the two bought and sold flowers until they had recovered two dollars. They hurried home, knowing their mother wouldn't be disappointed.

When he was nine, Ehrich joined an older kid who started the Jack Hoeffler 5-Cent Circus to make money. Ehrich created a tightrope stunt, calling himself

Ehrich, Prince of the Air, after seeing a traveling tightrope walker. The young people performed in an open field, Ehrich swinging from ropes and doing acrobatic stunts wearing a pair of red knitted tights his mother made for him. His first stunt? Bending over backward and picking a pin up off the ground with his teeth. Later he claimed he also picked up sewing pins from the floor with his eyelashes—but no one can know for sure.

Houdini later remembered, “Training as a contortionist was, of course, the first step toward my present occupation of escaping from strait-jackets and chains, for it is chiefly through my ability to twist my body and dislocate my joints, together with abnormal expansion and contraction powers, which renders me independent of the tightest bonds.” Gymnastics, exercise, and tumbling would remain part of his physical fitness training for the rest of his life.

His interests moved from gymnastics and acrobatics to magic. He had to teach himself, however, turning to books for all the information he could devour. He spent plenty of time at the public library reading whatever books caught his interest. His first book purchase, for ten cents, was a simple little book about magic.



Many children had to work instead of attending school.

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Step Through a Note Card

It took many years and lots of hard work before Harry Houdini became famous—or even well paid. As a kid he began doing street tricks, card tricks, and other sorts of things to earn tips from passersby. Those simple but clever little tricks remained important to him throughout the rest of his career because he often had to come up with something quickly to capture attention and interest. Here’s a clever trick with a note card that he described in his book *Houdini’s Paper Magic*.

The secret to this trick, or any magic trick, is in the presentation. Before performing, be sure to get the audience interested, stoking their curiosity with your enthusiasm. “Now . . . laaadies and geeentlemen . . . I will step through this note card, yes, this simple note card (pass it around for them to look over). With just a few snips from a pair of ordinary scissors, I’ll show you how it’s done!”

MATERIALS

1 index card (You might want to try the trick with a larger paper rectangle—it will work just fine, too, and will be easier to step through.)

Scissors

Fold the card lengthwise down the center. Using the scissors, make a series of cuts about 1/8-inch apart, cutting through the fold and stopping about 1/4-inch from the edge. After you’ve made cuts across the entire card, turn to the

other side and make another series of cuts, beginning along the edge and cutting just up to the fold. Make the cuts in between the earlier cuts. Unfold the card, spreading it flat. Leaving the first and last sections uncut, cut straight across through the fold. Gently expand the card and you’ll have a stretchy, flexible paper chain you can slip over your head and on over your body, stepping through it to audience applause.

