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Harry Houdini remains an iconic magician many decades after his death. During his career, he attracted and entertained thousands of fans and his great feats continue to astound people to date.

Coming from a poor background, Houdini worked his way up to become a legendary icon of escape. This essay will provide a review of Harry Houdini highlighting what he is best known for: his great escapes. The paper shall also proceed to articulate what motivated the man to become what is arguably the greatest escape artist of all time. Born Erik Weisz in Hungary on March 24, 1874, Harry Houdini was raised in hardship and poverty.

He was born to Mayes Samuel Weiss, a struggling rabbi and his wife Cecilia in Budapest, Hungary. The living conditions in the country were hard and the father decided to immigrate to the United States in 1876 in search of a better livelihood for the family. As soon as he had found some means of employment, the family immigrated to the United States in 1878 to be reunited with the father. It was here that the young Ehrich Weiss developed his interest in magic, mostly as a result of his surroundings. Louagie reveals that a significant moment in Ehrich's life was in 1880 when a circus train passed through the young boy's home town therefore exploding his interest in entertainment in general and magic in particular. At the onset, money was a major motivation for Ehrich to take up magic. Louagie records that Houdini came from a very poor family and since the parents where unable to make enough money to provide for the family, the children often took up jobs to support the family (6).

Hopkinson corroborates this by documenting that Houdini's father had a hard time finding a job and when he did, the pay was terribly low (5). Houdini made his attempts at practicing magic at an early age where he played the role of a contortionist for a friend's circus act. While he was adept at carrying out the tricks required, these acts were not enough to make a living out of and hence the young Ehrich had to carry out jobs to make ends. For this reason, he engaged in multiple jobs; electric driller, messenger and newsboy in addition to his role as a struggling magician to make his ends meet. Ehrich counted as his greatest idol the French magician Houdin whose works he studied avidly. For this reason, Erich Weiss took up the stage name "Houdini" in honor of his idol, the acclaimed French magician Jean Eugene Houdin (Louagie 6). Ehrich's first major attempt at magic was in partnership with a similarly struggling magician called Jacob Hyman.

Together the two formed the "Brothers Houdini" and engaged in magic as full time entertainers. However, this partnership did not last and three years later, the two split ways with Ehrich reinventing himself as Harry Houdini. At the onset of his career, Houdini performed a myriad of tricks including; songs, dances, puppetry and card tricks. He did not fair well and he was pitted against other performers including belly dancers and half-men-half-women; all of whom gained higher crowds and hence got better wages.

Louagie documents that it was on his return to his hometown in 1887, Wisconsin as part of a theatre group that Houdini realized his potential as an escape artist (7). Following this "revelation", Houdini began to focus his talents into specializing his escape crafts. A turning point in Houdini's life

was during his performance at the Palm-garden bear hall in Minnesota in 1899.

During his act, a famous tycoon, Martin Beck was impressed by Houdini's performance and he offered to recruit Houdini for his Orpheum houses (Louagie 9). This offer changed the magician's life as he was exposed to a greater audience and he made significantly more money than he made doing his independent shows throughout the country. Houdini made use of many tricks in his role as entertainer but he was best known for his great escape tricks. Hopkinson notes that Houdini relied on the help of his performance assistance as well as theater managers who sneaked him lock-picking tools to ensure the success of his escape acts (4). However, detractors and fans alike acknowledge that the physical strength and daring nature of the man were the real force behind his success. Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia notes that Houdini was famed for " his escape from bonds of every sort-locks, handcuffs, straitjackets, and sealed chests underwater". As a matter of fact, his name, " Houdini" was added to the " Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary as a synonym for the word escape" (Louagie 12). As soon as Houdini had achieved some measure of success and therefore made a substantial living for himself and his family, money stopped being the major motivator.

Now the motivation for Houdini was to become an international star, well known and with fans all over the world. Hopkinson notes that in particular, Houdini purposed to be " the greatest escape artist in the world" and he in fact Houdini duped himself " The King of Handcuffs", (5). While Houdini is best remembered for his great and enigmatic performances, he also played a part in civic awareness.

On announcing his planned retirement from the stage in 1922, Houdini began a crusade against psychic fraud and spiritualism. Houdini believed that mediums played into the anxieties and desperations of people and ripped them off their fortunes. He was empathetic of the victims of the mediums and he therefore set out on a crusade to expose this fraudulent people who preyed on the vulnerable. The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia records that Houdini was also celebrated for his role in exposing fraudulent spiritualist mediums In 1926, Houdini took a farewell tour and while at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, a group of students dared to test Houdini's stomach muscles which the magician had bragged to be incredibly strong (Hopkinson 5).

This was to be his last dare and as a result of the hit, the legendary Houdini suffered from an injury which resulted in his death on October 31, 1926 at the age of 52years. Harry Houdini is without a doubt one of the most celebrated escape artists of all time. His works continue to inspire magic through the 20th century and his acts have been reinvented by many a magician This paper set out to document the life of this magician with particular emphasis on what he was best known for and his motivations which resulted in him being a legendary figure. From this paper, it is clear that most of Houdini's successes where as a result of his iron will determination to succeed. His greatest works were his escapes which made him a phenomenon in his time and a legend to date.

Works Cited

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