



What caused Harry Houdini's mysterious death?

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The name Harry Houdini still conjures up images of great escapes from impossible situations, 93 years after his death in Detroit, Michigan.

But his real name was Erik Weisz, and he was born 145 years ago today, March 24, in Budapest. The Weisz family immigrated to the United States in 1878 when Erik was only 4 years old. He grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin, where his father was the rabbi for the Zion Reform Jewish Congregation. There, the family surname was changed to the German spelling of Weiss and Erik became Ehrich, a boy better known for his talent at acrobatic feats and picking locks than rabbinical piety.

It was showbiz, and not the Talmud, that captured Ehrich's attention. At the age of 9, he ran away to join the circus as a trapeze artist and contortionist. Fascinated by conjuring of all kinds, especially that of the great 19th century French magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, Ehrich later took the name Harry Houdini, thinking that the additional "I" meant "like" in French.

The climax of his act in these early days of his remarkable career was when he invited anyone in the audience to tie him up and he would free himself, inside a locked cabinet. As the New York Times reported in its obituary of Houdini, one night in Coffeyville, Kansas, the local sheriff baited him with his handcuffs, bellowing to the audience, "If I put these on, you'll never get loose." It was a challenge that changed the young performer's life. He emerged sans shackles and was soon riding the rails. Billed as "the Handcuff King," he performed at vaudeville houses across the nation.

Ever the scintillating showman, Houdini kept developing new tricks and escape techniques beyond merely wiggling out of a cop's manacles. In 1900, he made his first European tour and conducted sensational escapes from Scotland Yard and dozens of other famous prisons. In 1902, he had himself locked into cell no. 2 of the Washington, D.C., federal prison, the same cell that once housed Charles Guiteau, the man who assassinated President James Garfield. Soon enough, Houdini got out of jail free.

By 1908, Houdini had graduated to far more daring escapes from air tight vessels filled with water as well as being completely tied up and chained, while hanging off of a skyscraper or being thrown from a bridge into an icy river, always reappearing unrestricted within minutes.

He may have escaped those dangerous feats, yet his death has remained a source of conjecture among both magicians and surgeons.

Houdini never told anyone, save his wife and assistant, Bess, the secret of his great escapes. On the other hand, he was proud enough of his superb musculature and toned body to allow the audience to feel his biceps or punch him in his ripped abdomen.

As the story goes, a few medical students from McGill University visited Houdini in his dressing room at 5 p.m. on Oct. 22, 1926, after his matinee show at the Princess Theatre in Montreal. A few days earlier, Houdini had lectured at McGill about his work in exposing fake mediums and spiritualists. One student, Joselyn Gordon Whitehead asked if he could take a punch and immediately Houdini nodded an assent. The student hit the great magician twice but before he had a chance to tighten his abdominal muscles and brace himself. The "hammer-like" punches caused visible pain and Houdini stopped Whitehead in mid-blow on the third attempt to punch his gut.

As Houdini travelled by train more than 15 hours to his next performance in Detroit, he experienced a great deal of pain, which he blamed solely on the belly punches and a recently fractured foot.

By the time Houdini got to the Garrick Theatre in Detroit, his temperature was 104 degrees Fahrenheit. A physician was called to his dressing room and diagnosed Harry with acute appendicitis. The doctor ordered an ambulance to take Houdini immediately to the hospital but the performer had been schooled on the old adage that “the show must go on!”

He declined the medico's help, declaring, “I'll do this show if it's my last.” The performance was not his best but did not include him collapsing on the stage or having to be rescued from the water torture chamber by an ax-wielding assistant as many apocryphal tales and motion pictures have claimed.

After the performance, Houdini checked into his hotel. He still refused medical treatment but the pain was so great that his wife, Bess, demanded he be rushed to the nearby Grace Hospital. There, on Oct. 24, he underwent an emergency operation to remove his appendix, which had already ruptured and caused severe peritonitis, a raging and difficult-to-treat infection of the abdominal cavity. After a second operation on Oct. 28, and the introduction of a new anti-streptococcal serum, the great Houdini succumbed to overwhelming sepsis. He died on Oct. 31, 1926 at the age of 52. His last words, reportedly, were “I'm tired of fighting.”

The doctors at the time concurred that the appendicitis was likely caused by the blunt force of the medical student's blows, which burst and then caused Houdini's fatal infection. But a 2013 literature review published in the *World Journal of Emergency Surgery* (2013; 8:31) concluded that as a cause of acute appendicitis, “blunt abdominal trauma is rare and, occasionally, appendicitis and trauma exist together, which causes an interesting debate whether trauma has led to appendicitis.”

The poor medical student probably went to his grave thinking he had deprived the world of the great Harry Houdini. Fans still concoct conspiracy theories of Whitehead's intentions of causing harm. It is possible that the blows caused Houdini's appendicitis, but it is also more than possible that the blows and the appendicitis were coincidental rather than causal, and that the muscular pain from Whitehead's wallops gave Houdini a false explanation for his abdominal pain. Harry may have simply ignored the fire brewing in his belly and chalked it up to a punch in the gut, which delayed him seeing a doctor, having his appendix removed before it ruptured, and recovering—all reasonable outcomes in 1926, provided there was no peritonitis.

Always interested in the possibility that spiritualism might be real, Houdini promised to send his wife a message from beyond, if he died first. The message never came.

Just as with Houdini's spectacular escapes on stage, we will never really know how he escaped from this life — or if he was able to escape to the next.

By – **Dr. Howard Markel**

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