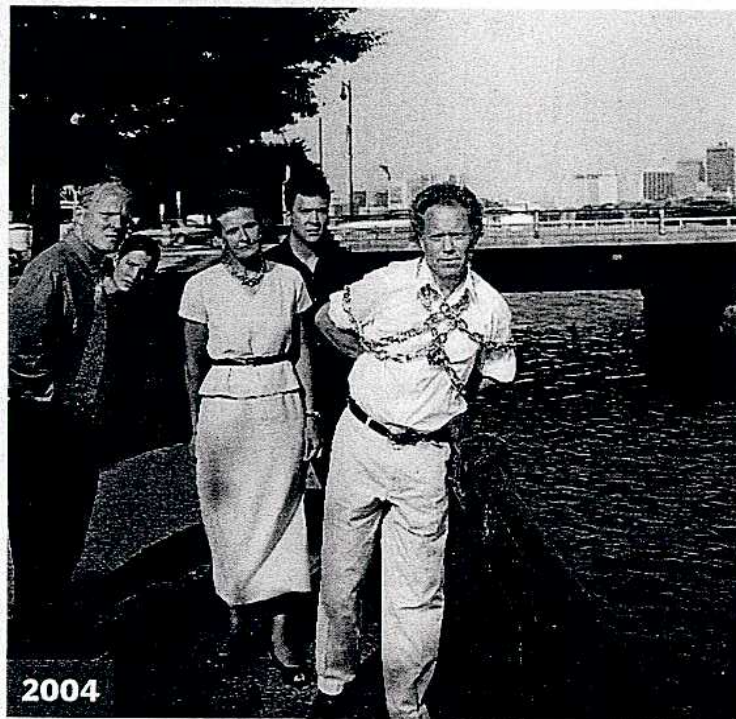


Charles River Magic



1908



2004

His hands and arms are trussed in chains and locks as Harry Houdini prepares to leap into the Charles River. Spectators line the Harvard Bridge in the background. Soon after disappearing underwater, Houdini will emerge triumphant with his locks miraculously open.

Such “impossible” escapes were Houdini’s forte, and they made him easily the most famous magician in American history. Another Houdini feat was to let himself be padlocked into a wooden crate, which was then thrown into a river. And in another trick — one we don’t think we’d want to witness — he would swallow loose thread and needles and then regurgitate them with all the needles threaded.

In the 1908 photo, Houdini is standing on the Charles River embankment near what today is MIT. For the new photo, we asked some fans of the river to reen-

act the scene. Standing in for Houdini is John DeVillars. Back in 1995, DeVillars was regional administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency, from which position he promoted the goal of a “swimmable” Charles by 2005. Although we’re not quite there yet, the once polluted river is a lot cleaner than it used to be, and DeVillars says it is indeed swimmable except after heavy rains. The chief remaining problem is old sediments that still line the bottom. DeVillars, we noticed, didn’t actually jump in.

Standing next to DeVillars is Renata von Tscharnner, founder and president of the Charles River Conservancy, a group that works to improve the Charles and its parklands. With her are members of her staff. Von Tscharnner claims Houdini was in greater danger of dying from waterborne contagion than from drowning. She thinks of herself as a successor to noted

landscape architect Charles Eliot, one of the creators of Boston’s park system, who wrote of the Charles in 1892: “People who live near it are well acquainted with the peculiar odor.”

Harry Houdini was born in Budapest as Ehrich Weiss and came to the United States as a toddler. He died in 1926, at the age of 52, from complications of appendicitis, probably exacerbated by a punch to the stomach from a college student in Canada. Houdini routinely invited such blows, but on this occasion he was unprepared and failed to firm his muscles.

People leave odd marks on the world. At 278 West 113th Street, a house Houdini owned in New York, you can still see “HH” in the mosaic on the bathroom floor.

When he died, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a memorable headline: “Death Chains Balk Houdini in Battle to Break Shackles of Grim Reaper.” **EG**