

LEVEL A2

The Man Who Sold the Eiffel Tower

Almost Twice

In 1925 a con man called Victor Lustig tried to sell the Eiffel Tower to scrap metal dealers in Paris. Sean tells Olivia how he did it, almost twice.

Key words

- | | |
|-------------|-----------|
| ● repair | ● nervous |
| ● temporary | ● doubt |
| ● official | ● bribe |
| ● fake | ● partner |
| ● dealer | ● escape |
| ● offer | ● honest |

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How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
repair <i>noun</i>	Work to fix something that is old or broken.	<i>Our car needs some repairs before the summer trip.</i>
temporary <i>adjective</i>	For a short time only.	<i>I have a temporary job in a café for the summer.</i>
official <i>adjective</i>	From the government or another important office.	<i>You need an official letter from your school for the new passport.</i>
fake <i>adjective</i>	Made to look real, but it is a copy.	<i>The man at the market sells fake designer bags.</i>
dealer <i>noun</i>	A person who buys and sells one type of thing.	<i>My uncle is a car dealer, so he always knows the best prices.</i>
offer <i>noun</i>	The amount of money you say you will pay for something.	<i>We made an offer on a small flat near the park.</i>
nervous <i>adjective</i>	A little afraid or worried about something.	<i>I always feel nervous before a job interview.</i>
doubt <i>noun</i>	A feeling that something is maybe not true or not right.	<i>I have some doubts about this cheap holiday. It looks too good.</i>
bribe <i>noun</i>	Money you give someone secretly, so they help you.	<i>The driver offered the police officer a bribe, and now he is in bigger trouble.</i>
partner <i>noun</i>	A person who works or does business with you.	<i>My sister and her business partner opened a small bakery together.</i>
escape <i>verb</i>	To get out of a place when people want to keep you there.	<i>Our cat escaped through the kitchen window again this morning.</i>
honest <i>adjective</i>	Telling the truth.	<i>Be honest with me. Do you really like my new haircut?</i>

Full transcript

The Man Who Sold the Eiffel Tower: Almost Twice

- OLIVIA** Wait. He sold the Eiffel Tower?
- SEAN** The real one, all seven thousand tons of metal.
- OLIVIA** Where do you even put seven thousand tons of metal?
- SEAN** The buyer had much bigger problems than that.
- OLIVIA** Okay, start at the beginning.
- SEAN** This is Aprendos English, level A2. I'm Sean.
- OLIVIA** And I'm Olivia.
- SEAN** So it's Paris in 1925, and a man sits in his hotel room. He's reading a newspaper article about the Eiffel Tower.
- OLIVIA** Is this our man?
- SEAN** This is our man, and his name is Victor Lustig. He wears very good suits, and he speaks a lot of languages.
- OLIVIA** I like him already, and that's probably a bad sign.
- SEAN** It's a very bad sign, because Victor is a professional con man. The article says the old tower needs expensive repairs.
- OLIVIA** Repairs, yes, and they paint the whole tower every seven years. I read about it before my first trip to Paris.
- SEAN** Now listen. After this article, our man gets a very big idea.
- OLIVIA** I think he steals something.
- SEAN** He wants something much bigger.
- OLIVIA** What's bigger than stealing?
- SEAN** He wants to sell the tower.
- OLIVIA** But it isn't his tower!
- SEAN** For Victor, that's a small detail.
- OLIVIA** And everybody in Paris loves the Eiffel Tower!
- SEAN** They love it today, but at the start lots of people hated it.
- OLIVIA** Oh, right, and it was only a temporary tower at first. I remember this part from my trip too.
- SEAN** Okay, you tell it.
- OLIVIA** They built it in 1889 for a big world fair in Paris. The plan was to take the whole tower down after twenty years...
- SEAN** ...so in 1909.
- OLIVIA** Yes, but then they put a radio antenna on the top of it. The radio was very useful for France, so the tower stayed.
- SEAN** So in 1925, a plan to take it down didn't sound crazy.
- OLIVIA** I hate it, but it's clever.

- SEAN** So first, Lustig pays a man to make **fake** government paper. It has the **official** French government sign right at the top.
- OLIVIA** And what job does he have on this paper?
- SEAN** He says he's a top man at the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs.
- OLIVIA** Wait. Why the post office?
- SEAN** Nobody really knows the answer to that. My guess is that a post office job sounds very boring.
- OLIVIA** And nobody asks questions about a boring job.
- SEAN** Next he writes letters to the big scrap metal **dealers** in Paris.
- OLIVIA** Scrap metal dealers, so they buy old metal...
- SEAN** ...and they sell it again, yes.
- OLIVIA** How many dealers get a letter?
- SEAN** The books say five or six.
- OLIVIA** Great. No clear numbers. My favorite.
- SEAN** Then you're going to love the rest of this story. He invites the dealers to a very expensive hotel, the Crillon.
- OLIVIA** A hotel? Why not the ministry?
- SEAN** He tells them the plan is a big secret for now. The people of Paris can get very angry about it.
- OLIVIA** If I'm a dealer, I just call the ministry.
- SEAN** You and your phone calls.
- OLIVIA** I'm a journalist, Sean, so I check things and I call people.
- SEAN** Well, nobody in this story called anybody at all. Lustig tells them the tower costs the city too much money. So the city wants to sell it for scrap metal...
- OLIVIA** ...and the best **offer** gets all the metal.
- SEAN** All seven thousand tons, yes.
- OLIVIA** And they just believe him?
- SEAN** He's calm and very official, and they like all that money. After the meeting, he drives them to the tower in a big car.
- OLIVIA** Like a private tour?
- SEAN** A private tour, and they walk around and look at all that metal. Then they go home and they send in their offers.
- OLIVIA** Okay, the highest offer wins, and Lustig takes that man's money.
- SEAN** No, because Lustig has a different plan in his head. He watches the men very carefully at the meeting...
- OLIVIA** ...looking for the richest one?
- SEAN** He's looking for the **nervous** one.
- OLIVIA** Oh no. Who is it?
- SEAN** His name is André Poisson, and he's quite new in Paris business. He wants the important men in the city to respect him.
- OLIVIA** Poor guy, I feel bad already.

- SEAN Poisson starts to have a small **doubt** about the whole thing. Why is it all so secret, and why is it all so fast?
- OLIVIA Yes! Now he calls the ministry...
- SEAN ...no, because Lustig finds a better answer first.
- OLIVIA What kind of answer?
- SEAN You tell me. Go on, guess.
- OLIVIA He shows him more official papers?
- SEAN No.
- OLIVIA He takes him back there?
- SEAN No. He asks for a **bribe**.
- OLIVIA A bribe? How does that help?
- SEAN Lustig tells Poisson that his government pay is very small. So he needs a little extra money from a good friend.
- OLIVIA Oh, Sean, that's really evil.
- SEAN Why is it evil?
- OLIVIA Because in Poisson's head, a bribe means a real government man. A fake official only wants the sale and nothing else.
- SEAN So Poisson feels safe, and he pays for everything.
- OLIVIA How much does he pay?
- SEAN Some books say seventy thousand francs for the bribe alone.
- OLIVIA And for the tower?
- SEAN Much more, but the number changes from book to book.
- OLIVIA Again? This story needs an editor.
- SEAN Anyway, Lustig has the money now, so he leaves Paris fast. He and his **partner** get on a train to Austria...
- OLIVIA ...wait, there's a partner?
- SEAN There's a partner, an American man with a lot of names. He plays Lustig's secretary, and some books call him Dan Collins.
- OLIVIA So they run to Austria, and then they wait for the police.
- SEAN They wait, and Lustig buys the French newspapers every single day.
- OLIVIA And the story is on the front page.
- SEAN Nothing. Not one word.
- OLIVIA Nothing? But why not?
- SEAN Poisson told nobody, and he didn't go to the police.
- OLIVIA Because he felt stupid.
- SEAN He felt very stupid, I think, and I understand that. He paid for a tower, and he only got a piece of paper.
- OLIVIA I understand that feeling, because I was the same at twelve. I wrote a little newspaper for the people on my street. One week my big story was wrong, so I hid in my room.

SEAN So you and Poisson are basically the same person.

OLIVIA A little bit, but I only lost my pride that week.

SEAN And Lustig learns something very big from all this. Poisson's shame keeps Lustig safe from the police.

OLIVIA Oh no, he goes back.

SEAN He goes back to Paris, but nobody agrees on the date. Some books say one month later, and some books say six.

OLIVIA Again with the numbers!

SEAN He tries the same trick, with the same letters and the same story...

OLIVIA ...and he sells it again!

SEAN Well, this time the buyer goes to the police.

OLIVIA Wait. Before he pays?

SEAN Before he pays, yes.

OLIVIA So he only sold it once!

SEAN He tried twice.

OLIVIA That's a very different headline, Sean.

SEAN That's why our title says "almost twice."

OLIVIA Oh. So the title is honest.

SEAN Very honest. Unlike Lustig.

OLIVIA Good. So what happens next?

SEAN Now the story is in the newspapers, so Lustig runs again. This time he goes all the way to America.

OLIVIA Oh, can I tell this part?

SEAN Please do.

OLIVIA In America he starts a new business with fake money. For years, he and his partners make lots of fake dollars.

SEAN That's right. And then what happens?

OLIVIA In 1935 the police finally catch him in New York. A few months later, he escapes from the prison...

SEAN ...with a rope, I think?

OLIVIA With a rope from his bed sheets, out of a window. The police catch him again about four weeks later, in Pittsburgh.

SEAN And where do they send him this time?

OLIVIA Guess.

SEAN Somewhere very far away from Paris.

OLIVIA Alcatraz, the famous prison on an island near San Francisco.

SEAN Well, that's far from Paris, and there are no nice hotels.

OLIVIA No hotels. He died there in 1947...

SEAN ...actually, he died in a prison hospital in Missouri.

- OLIVIA** Oh, you're right. Missouri, in 1947.
- SEAN** And his death certificate is my favorite part. Can you guess the job on that paper?
- OLIVIA** Con man?
- SEAN** Apprentice salesman.
- OLIVIA** A beginner? He sold a tower!
- SEAN** Almost twice.
- OLIVIA** Almost twice, thank you very much.
- SEAN** And there's one more strange thing about him. In 2015, a historian looked for Lustig in old records from his home town. It's a small town in the Czech Republic today.
- OLIVIA** And he found a birth record?
- SEAN** He found nothing, not one piece of paper about Lustig's birth.
- OLIVIA** So maybe even the name Victor Lustig is fake.
- SEAN** Maybe, because we still don't know his true story for sure.
- OLIVIA** So he sells a tower, and then he sells us a mystery.
- SEAN** Now it's your turn, listeners. Poisson paid all that money and then he stayed quiet. Do you understand his silence, or was he just a fool? Write your answer under this video.
- OLIVIA** And you can read every word from today, for free. Open the description and download the PDF.
- SEAN** So, any last questions, Olivia?
- OLIVIA** Where do you put seven thousand tons of metal, then?
- SEAN** You don't. It's still standing in the center of Paris.
- OLIVIA** Good, and next time I'm in Paris, I'm calling the ministry first.
- SEAN** Of course you are. See you soon, everyone.
- OLIVIA** See you soon!

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. What did the newspaper article in 1925 say about the Eiffel Tower?

- ☐ It needed a new radio antenna.
- ☐ It needed expensive repairs.
- ☐ It was going to move to another city.

2. Where did Lustig meet the scrap metal dealers?

- ☐ At the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs.
- ☐ At the top of the Eiffel Tower.
- ☐ At the Crillon, a very expensive hotel.

3. Why did Lustig choose André Poisson?

- ☐ Poisson was nervous and quite new in Paris business.
- ☐ Poisson sent the highest offer.
- ☐ Poisson was an old friend from Austria.

4. Why did Poisson stay quiet after he paid?

- ☐ Lustig paid him some money back.
- ☐ He felt very stupid.
- ☐ The police didn't answer his calls.

5. What job was on Lustig's death certificate?

- ☐ Con man.
- ☐ Scrap metal dealer.
- ☐ Apprentice salesman.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

Lustig loved fake things. Each word has three definitions, and only one is real. Find it.

1. bribe

- ☐ A small French bread that people eat with coffee.
- ☐ A letter from the post office with an official sign.
- ☐ Money you give someone secretly, so they help you.

2. temporary

- ☐ For a short time only.
- ☐ Very tall and made of metal.
- ☐ Loved by everybody in Paris.

3. dealer

- ☐ A person who writes for a newspaper.
- ☐ A person who buys and sells one type of thing.
- ☐ A person who paints a tower every seven years.

4. doubt

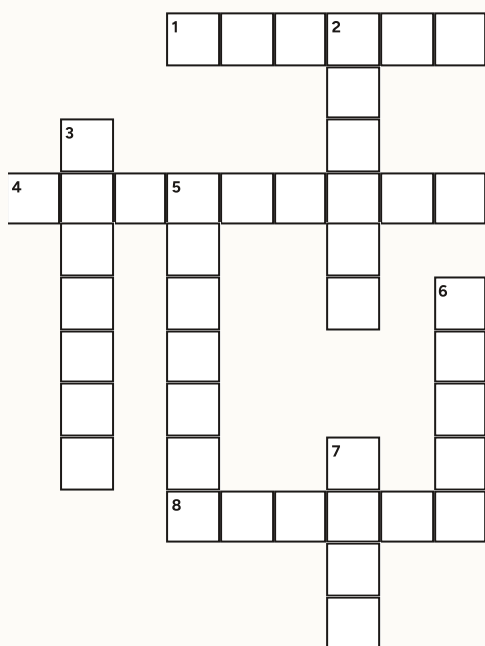
- ☐ A second try at the same trick.
- ☐ A very expensive room in a hotel.
- ☐ A feeling that something is maybe not true.

5. official

- ☐ Very funny and a little bit crazy.
- ☐ From the government or another important office.
- ☐ Old and ready for the scrap metal dealers.

Exercise 2. Crossword

All the answers are key words from the episode.

**ACROSS**

- 1** Olivia: "So the title is ____." Sean: "Very ____." Unlike Lustig." (6)
- 4** At first, the Eiffel Tower was only for twenty years. It was a ____ tower. (9)
- 8** Your old bike is broken again. It needs a _____. (6)

DOWN

- 2** In 1935 Lustig made a rope from his bed sheets to ____ from prison. (6)
- 3** At the meeting, Lustig watched the dealers carefully. He was looking for the ____ one. (7)
- 5** Dan Collins played Lustig's secretary. He was Lustig's ____ in crime. (7)
- 6** After the tour, each dealer wrote how much he wanted to pay. This was his _____. (5)
- 7** Lustig's government papers looked real. In fact, they were _____. (4)

Exercise 3. Your turn

You are a scrap metal dealer in Paris in 1925, and you get a letter from Lustig. What do you do? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. It needed expensive repairs.
2. At the Crillon, a very expensive hotel.
3. Poisson was nervous and quite new in Paris business.
4. He felt very stupid.
5. Apprentice salesman.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

1. bribe: Money you give someone secretly, so they help you.
2. temporary: For a short time only.
3. dealer: A person who buys and sells one type of thing.
4. doubt: A feeling that something is maybe not true.
5. official: From the government or another important office.

Exercise 2. Crossword

- 1 across: honest
- 4 across: temporary
- 8 across: repair
- 2 down: escape
- 3 down: nervous
- 5 down: partner
- 6 down: offer
- 7 down: fake

Exercise 3. Example answer

I read the letter, and I have a doubt at once. Why is the meeting in a hotel? I call the ministry, because I think the paper is fake. Then I go to the police, and Lustig has to escape again.