

HISTORY OF PILATES JOSEPH. H. PILATES



Joseph H. Pilates was born in 1883 in Mönchengladbach, Germany of Greek ancestry. His father was a prize-winning gymnast of Greek ancestry, and his German born mother worked as a naturopath. The family originally spelled their surname in the Greek manner as "Pilatu" but changed to using "Pilates." This caused Joseph Pilates much grief as a child, because older boys taunted him calling him "Pontius Pilate, killer of Christ." Joe Pilates was a sickly child and suffered from asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever, and he dedicated his entire life to improving his physical strength. Besides skiing frequently, he began studying body-building, yoga, zen, and gymnastics. By the age of 14, he was fit enough to pose for anatomical charts. Pilates came to believe that the "modern" life-style, bad posture, and inefficient breathing lay at the roots of poor health. He ultimately devised a series of exercises and training-techniques and engineered all the equipment, specifications, and tuning required to teach his methods properly. Joe was originally a gymnast, diver, and bodybuilder, but when he moved to England in 1912, he earned a living as a professional boxer, circus-performer, and self-defense trainer at police schools and Scotland Yard. Nevertheless, the British authorities interned him during World War I along with other German citizens in a camp on the Isle of Man. During this involuntary break, he began to intensively develop his concept of an integrated, comprehensive system of physical exercise, which he himself called "Contrology." He studied yoga and the movements of animals and trained his fellow inmates in fitness and exercises. He rigged springs to hospital beds, enabling bedridden patients to exercise against resistance; an innovation that led to his later equipment designs. It is told that these inmates survived the great pandemic of 1918 due to their good physical shape.

The Pilates movement gains in popularity – from Europe to the U.S.

In 1926, Joe immigrated to the United States. During the voyage he met Clara, whom he later married. Joe and Clara opened a Pilates studio in New York, sharing an address with the New York City Ballet. By the early 1960s, Joe and Clara could count among their clients many New York dancers. George Balanchine studied "at Joe's," as he called it, and also invited Pilates to instruct his young ballerinas at the New York City Ballet. "Pilates" was becoming popular outside of New York as well. As the New York Herald Tribune noted in 1964, "in dance classes around the United States, hundreds of young students limber up daily with an exercise they know as a pilates, without knowing that the word has a capital P, and a living, right-breathing namesake."



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When Joe passed away in 1967, he left no will and had designated no line of succession for the "Pilates" work to carry on. Nevertheless, his work would remain. Clara continued to operate what was known as the "Pilates" Studio on Eighth Avenue in New York, where Romana Kryzanowska became the director around 1970. Kryzanowska had studied with Joe and Clara in the early 1940s and then, after a 15-year hiatus spent in Peru, returned to renew her studies.

Joe continued to train clients at his studio until his death in 1967, at the age of 87. In the 1970s, Hollywood celebrities discovered Pilates via Ron Fletcher's studio in Beverly Hills. Where the stars go, the media follows. In the late 1980s, the media began to cover Pilates extensively. The public took note, and the Pilates business boomed. "I'm fifty years ahead of my time," Joe once claimed. He was right.

Joseph Pilates wrote several books, including *Return to Life through Contrology* and *Your Health*, and he was also a prolific inventor. Joe and Clara had a number of disciples who continued to teach variations of his method or, in some cases, focused exclusively on preserving the method, and the instructor-training techniques, they had learned during their studies with Joe and Clara

No longer the workout of the elite, Pilates has entered the fitness mainstream. Today, over 10 million people around the world practice Pilates, and the numbers continue to grow.



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