

History Of Pilates

Joseph H. Pilates
(1880 – 1967)



Clair & Joseph Pilates

Joseph Humbertus Pilates lived to be a robust and vital 87 year old icon. Had he not succumbed to the effects of smoke inhalation during a fire, in the restaurant below his studio on 8th Avenue in New York City, he potentially could have demonstrated an incredible level of physical fitness for many years to come. Looking at photographs of Joseph Pilates, even well into his eighties, it may be hard to imagine that he did not always enjoy such vitality.

Pilates was born near Dusseldorf, Germany in 1880. His unusual last name is actually derived from his Greek heritage and would have been Pilatos. Much controversy surrounds the correct pronunciation of his name; however, nearly all publications show it as (Pi –LAH – teez). All instructors crack an amused smile at the mispronunciation of his name by those outside the Pilates loop. Living relatives of Joseph Pilates say that the name was not pronounced as it is popularly known today. Mary Pilates LaRiche, the niece of Joseph Pilates, and a long time resident of South Florida, says her family name, as best she can recall, was pronounced (Pi – LOTTs).

Mary Pilates LeRiche qualifies as an expert and probably was Joseph's earliest disciple as she had worked in her Uncle Joe's exercise studio as a young woman in her 20's. A now famous photograph of Pilates' exercise studio at 939 Eighth Ave., NY, NY displays a long rectangular room with at least four Reformers (the original group sessions?) in a line. Joseph stands between two, his wife, Clara, in her nurse's uniform, by another, and his niece Mary at yet another Reformer. Mary relocated to South Florida in the 1960's and continued teaching fitness as her uncle had taught her. Even today, at 81 years young, she will demonstrate the "only way" the exercises should ever be done. That would be just the same way it was done in the 1940's.

"People won't understand the brilliance of my work for 50 years." That is a quote from Joseph, himself, about 50 years ago. Mary LeRiche says that her uncle would be quite happy and surprised at just how much impact his work is having on the world. Today, healthcare professionals are studying and implementing his work into their healing therapies. Medical doctors are writing prescriptions for their patients: Pilates. His clever exercise apparatus designs are virtually the exact designs used by today's equipment manufacturers. How many of the exercise machines found in today's traditional gym setting can accommodate hundreds of exercises on one single piece the size of a twin bed? The Wunda Chair doubled as a small living room side chair that when flipped upon its back becomes a gymnasium with two bedsprings. Pilates felt that every home should have one.

As a child he had suffered with asthma, rickets, and rheumatic fever. Even as a young adolescent he made a life-altering decision that he would restore his own health. He studied the Eastern disciplines of yoga and martial arts and blended them with Western forms of physical activities such as bodybuilding, gymnastics, boxing, and recreational sports. At the young age of just fourteen years he had sculpted his physique so well that he was posing for anatomical charts.

As a young man he moved from Germany to England where he became a boxer, circus performer, and self-defense instructor. When World War One erupted he, and other German nationals, were incarcerated in Lancaster as "enemy aliens." Pilates influenced the other detainees to follow his exercise regime which he called, "Contrology." His fitness program was so beneficial that he and his fellow compatriots survived

the 1918 influenza epidemic that took the lives of thousands of people. He attributed their survival to their physically fit lungs! Hence, the Pilates Principle of Diaphragmatic Breathing!

Pilates was later sent to the Isle of Man to work as a nurse orderly caring for the war wounded. One can imagine the condition of many of these soldiers; some had probably grown weak from lingering in hospital beds for months, their muscles atrophied, further inhibiting their potential for recovery. Unable to participate in Pilates' floor exercises, these men benefited by Joseph's cleverly designed apparatus to rehabilitate them right from their hospital beds and wheelchairs. Looking at the Cadillac one can see the table as the hospital bed; plumbing pipes create the canopy and borrowed bedsprings become first assistive and then resistive exercise tools. Despite whatever injuries the wounded may have had, Pilates was able to strengthen their muscles and restore them to their potential good health.

After the war Joseph returned to Germany but became disenfranchised with the political direction his country was taking. He decided to immigrate to the United States of America. He met his future wife, Clara, on the ship. Clara was a nurse and they realized that they shared the same interest of wanting to restore the good health of others. When they arrived in New York they decided to open up a physical fitness studio.

Joseph Pilates' method of physical and mental wellness has been a best-kept secret of the dance and entertainment world since the 1920's when his studio was discovered by Martha Graham, the mother of modern dance, George Balanchine, the artistic director for the New York City Ballet, and Rudolf von Laban, founder of Labanotation. Dancers such as Hanya Holm and Romana Kryzanowska, along with prizefighters, actors, actresses, and traveling circus performers embraced his methods both for the total body conditioning needed for the rigors of their work and also for rehabilitating the injuries that often plague dancers, performers, and athletes.

Dance companies all over the world use Pilates' exercises to keep their dancers in top form. Many dancers go on to become Hollywood celebrities; Patrick Swayze and Madonna to name only two. Due to the attention the mainstream public gives to Hollywood celebrities the name Pilates is now a household word. If Madonna does it, it must work.

Romana Kryzanowska entered Pilates' world as a young dancer in New York. Pilates regarded her as his disciple; she had absorbed and could express the essence of his work as if it were coming from him. She continues his legacy today in New York and has generously shared her knowledge with the world through her students, books, videos, and lectures.

Joseph's obituary, appearing in the New York Times in 1967, reads like an advertisement for his methods. He is described as a white-maned lion with steel blue eyes (one was glass from a boxing mishap), and mahogany skin, and as limber in his 80's as a teenager.

Joseph and Clara operated their exercise studio for over 40 years. He had dedicated his life's work to restoring the health and vitality of others. Gone now for thirty-five years, the essence of his work continues on into the 21st century