

Aporkalypse Now

by Jane McCarthy © 8.19.2009

Joseph Pilates lived in interesting times. Born in Germany as Classical ideas resurged in Europe, he grew up during the time Olympia was archeologically excavated and the Olympic Games physically revived. He lived his life like Apollo, healer and sun god -- but he also underwent dark cursed times more evocative of Hades, the god of the underworld.

Tales of Pilates' life reach dizzyingly mythic heights. The hundred stories in circulation online about Joe Pilates' history before he immigrated to New York after World War I suggest that he was a skier, skin diver, gymnast, boxer, self-defense trainer, bodybuilder, martial artist, yogi, karate expert, anatomical model, and wrestler. He studied history, philosophy, engineering, and anatomy. He labored in a beer factory, and it's said he was a trained nurse. He practiced Tai Chi, Buddhist meditation, ancient Greek and Roman regimens -- and even Zen! His family owned a gym, his dad was a professional gymnast or a mechanic and his mom was a naturopath or "just" a mother of nine. Some say he had a glass eye because he was attacked with a rock by a bully when he was five, which inspired him to overcome childhood infirmities. He trained both Scotland Yard and the Hamburg Military Police in self-defense. He was a prizefighter in the boxing ring and a star in the circus ring, performing in the circus world as a Roman gladiator or a Greek statue or a tumbler.

One story that isn't a stretch (and is more a mythic low than height) is that Pilates did time as a prisoner of war at Knockaloe on the Isle of Man in Great Britain. Red Cross records seem to indicate one "Josef" Pilates was interned there, captured as a "civilian alien." Joseph Pilates, that master of precision, was in precisely the wrong place at the wrong time -- a German in England when World War I, and all hell, broke loose.

The old saw goes that Pilates was a hospital orderly at Knockaloe, or maybe he could have been a physiotherapist, nurse, physical culturist -- or a simply a Contrology freak who gave his fellow inmates strength and sanity through exercises devised to prevent illness and "barbed-wire-itis" (a WWI term coined by a Quaker Pacifist "watch" committee who visited the notorious Knockaloe; it means insanity brought on by captivity). In the face of appalling wartime deprivation, Pilates claimed that none of his patients died as the 1918-1919 pandemic killed millions.

The French called it “*La Grippe*,” the English, “Knock-Me-Down-Fever;” the Germans, “*Blitzkatarrah*,” and in the autumn of 1918 the Americans began to reconsider their term, “Three Day Fever,” as patients digressed from perfect health to common influenza to pneumonia to death, sometimes in a matter of hours. 1918’s strain became known to anyone outside of Spain as “Spanish Influenza.” It likely originated in Kansas, but as a neutral country in WWI, Spain had no wartime censorship to keep its health problems secret from the world. The Spaniards attempted to counter this insult to their national reputation by deeming it “French Flu.”

Spanish Flu’s symptoms included persistent bloody coughing fits, sweating, fever, delirium, hemorrhaging of nose and ears, collapse, meningitis of the brain, and pneumonia of the lungs. In the Manx language influenza is “*yn cleetchagh*,” or “*yn floo*.”

Knockaloe, designed for 5,000 detainees, eventually interned 24,500 prisoners, and less than 200 deaths in total were reported over four tortuous years, including the pandemic that hit them at the end. Isle of Man detainee Paul Stoffa wrote of his Knockaloe hospitalization: “I was nailed to my cot for weeks; the ward was full of 'flu patients, isolation was not to be thought of. It was sad to watch the losing fight of so many who, worn out with four years' agony behind barbed-wire, went down when freedom was on the horizon at last.” (Joe didn’t claim that no one *got* the flue, but that none of his patients *died* of it.)

In other places, including military hospitals on American soil, bodies were literally stacked like cordwood when the flu went full force in the fall of 1918. Hospital workers, or whoever could be enlisted to do the task, wore rubber boots due to all the fluid gore on the floor. In a frantic attempt to inoculate, doctors injected phlegm and blood taken from corpses’ lungs directly into those desperate not to contract the flu. It did more harm than good.

People under Pilates’ care didn’t roll over and die because Joe, who overcame rickets, asthma, rheumatic fever and merciless bullying as a child, would have none of that. Pilates was a reformer. He strove for, lived for, the Classical ideal: “*Mens sana in corpore sano*,” (a sane mind in a sound body).

Joe led other internees in his exercises to maintain health and well-being. For the bedridden, he invented resistance training equipment from what was at hand. He sprang people from hospital using the bedsprings beneath them, and he released people from the sick ward using straps that had held them down. Jeremy Clarkson writes in the *London Times*, “Visit a Pilates studio today and you will find equipment that transparently betrays its bunk room ancestry.”

If Pilates' Art of Contrology helped detention camp prisoners boomerang back from a swan dive into Spanish Flu and then return to life, then how might we use Joe's system to swing the pendulum and survive the pandemic of H1N1?

In *Return to Life*, Pilates (apparently somewhat of a neat-nik) wrote, "While conceding the fact that nowadays practically everyone of us routinely indulges in daily baths, experience has nevertheless taught us that only a small minority really achieve thorough cleanliness thereby, from our point of view." He goes on to describe how to thoroughly cleanse, improve circulation, and open pores by vigorously scouring the body using a handheld brush, almost as if akin to sanitizing a disgustingly filthy floor while suffering from O.C.D.

Given that, it does seem doubtful that Joe would have allowed any coughing, sneezing, germy person into his New York studio. In that spirit, today we are free to go ahead and stay home if sick, and rest already. (Remember the "Zen;" don't get too attached to anything, including Pilates class.)

Pilates was big on exercise but also on rest, fresh air, sunshine and cleanliness. Even when feeling well, wash hands before and after class. Try not to touch the face – none of the Pilates exercises require it, and there's a reason for that. Think clean as a form of ablution (preparing yourself for spiritual practice by cleansing) when you're about to take a class. As Joe said, "With body, mind, and spirit functioning perfectly as a coordinated whole, what else could reasonably be expected other than an active, alert, disciplined person?"

Robert Wernick quotes Joe in a 1964 *Sports Illustrated* article: "It's all up here, in the head," "Think! Up!" We need a Pilates push up, and Joe provided it. Pilates was pushing forty when he put Knockaloe behind him. Not only did he outlive that experience by nearly fifty years, he turned what it taught him into a vocation from which we still learn.

After his release from Knockaloe, the hundred mythical stories continue: Joe may have been deported to Germany (or he went back of his own free will), and he may have trained the Hamburg police/new German Army in self-defense (although Germany was demilitarized following WWI), or maybe he stayed on in Great Britain teaching self-defense at Scotland Yard (because he couldn't get enough of jolly old England after years in jail). He left for America in 1925 (or one of several years earlier) because he hated Nazis and/or because

“America is the place to be when you have a new idea,” as journalist Wernick speculated, or possibly his immigration was aided by legendary boxer Max Schmeling (who was still a kid at the time). He met his lovely (second?) wife and wise side kick Clara (or Clare) crossing the Atlantic, she was a nurse (or a kindergarten teacher) and he may (or may not) have helped her cure her arthritis, to seal the deal on their romance.

Joseph Pilates’ mythology is a brain teaser, as all myths are. For all that he was a master of precision, Joe’s stories (reported, to be fair, through the filter of other people) were never as straight or as aligned as his buff body. “Don’t ask Joe,” Robert Wernick said, “for orderly exposition is not one of his talents.”

Why should it be? Pilates was the product of an era that aspired to physical health and beauty, not mundane matters. He lived life in pursuit of what he called “the trinity of godlike attributes ... physical well-being, mental calm and spiritual peace.” He saw both the up and the down side of adventure -- he survived sickliness, Knockaloe and the pandemic. He got to New York City just a few years before the Great Depression, and then another World War ... but that’s another story.