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CHASING JOE PILATES

by Stacey Redfield-Dreisbach

The life histories of Joseph and Clara Pilates appear to be covered, to some extent, in just about every Pilates' book, workshop, conference and training program. Most people know, for instance, that Joe and Clara immigrated to this country from Germany. They know that they ran a studio in New York City; but not everyone knows the stories that circulated about Joe's internment in a prison camp during World War I. They have never read the history that appears in many of the current books on Pilates that imply Joe's connection to heavyweight boxer Max Schmeling or his career as a circus performer.

I've heard most of the lore of Joseph Pilates, too, and had no reason not to believe the stories about Joe's love of beer, women and cigars. I never questioned how accurate these stories were or just how far-fetched, for example, is the story of Joe running through the streets of New York in the middle of winter wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy white trunks and his gym shoes really true? Even if the story isn't true, it doesn't dilute the contribution Joe Pilates made to the physical culture of our country.

There are still many facets to the life histories of Joe and Clara that have yet to be uncovered. For instance, why *did* Joe come to America? It was after WWI, and Germany was experiencing a severe depression. The deutschmark was worthless and there was no military to train which would have been reason enough to come to America. The stories written about Joe in the '50s and '60s vary and aren't consistent in stating any one particular reason. One article in *People* published in 1959 stated he came because of famous boxing promoter and publisher Nat Fleischer, but a later article that appeared in the *Daily news* in 1963 stated that Joe's first trip to America in 1925 was an intended vacation.

There are two stories about how Joe and Clara met. The first one was on the ship coming to America, and the second was on the boat from Ellis Island. I never believed the Ellis Island story because that is a very short boat ride, so that would have had to be one heck of a romance. Not only that, but Ellis Island closed in 1924.

PILATES HISTORICAL RESEARCH

A few years ago, I undertook a research project to try to see what I could discover about the real Joseph Pilates. Being somewhat of a history buff, I was fascinated with the collection of old photographs in the book *The Joseph H Pilates Archive Collection*. I started spending my open studio hours looking up some of the pieces of history I saw pictured in the book. Things got a little out of hand when a random internet search uncovered an original copy of *Return to Life* and my little project became an obsession. I became a collector searching archives for original articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines. It took me 10 years to track down the rare *Sports Illustrated* article from the 1960's, because there were East and West coast additions. I framed the newspaper articles from the *The New York Times* and *The Daily News*; photos from Chuck Rappaport; and regularly show the video footage of Joe Pilates compiled by Mary Bowen to my clients. My research has taken me to the New York Public Library where I spent days reading old newspapers from the 1920s – 1960s. I have been in touch with historians from the Isle of Man where Joe was interned during WWI, the Smithsonian Institute, Hot Springs Georgia and Arkansas as well as dozens of collectors, authors and any living person that could tell me about life in the '1920s. I read the original patent for the Reformer, the Wunda Chair and yes a catapult. (*I am not quite sure where he was going with that*) Each piece of information led me to more information, which eventually led me to the National Archives where I found the official records for every legal immigrant that came to our country, including Joe Pilates and Clara Zuener.

The majority of newspaper and magazine articles written about Joe's studio started in the '1950s leaving room for much speculation about the first 30 years of his career. There are still many unanswered questions pertaining to how Joe got his start in America, however, I have uncovered several documents here in the U.S. that might interest others who have wondered about Joe's life. I was able to uncover passenger ship manifests and official naturalization documents for both Joseph H. Pilates and Clara, whose was formerly known as Anna Clara, and her last name was Zuener. I discovered Clara's documents through a search of her death certificate. I also came across Joe's draft registration card from World War II.

SHIP MANIFESTS

Passenger manifests showed both Joe and Clara; then known as Anna Clara Zuener, crossed on a ship called the Westphalia, which left from Hamburg, Germany on April 14, 1926, and arrived in New York on April 27. They both traveled in second class and arrived in New York with Joe declaring 500 dollars in cash and Clara declaring only 35. [Passenger List- Joe 1926 Passenger List- Clara 1926](#) It turns out that Joe had also crossed previously on a ship called the Albert Ballin on October 6, 1925, returning to Germany 60 days later. The second page of the manifest showed that Joe travelled in first class and declared 800 dollars in cash. It also declared his final destination to be 22 Broadway, New York to visit a friend at Marks and Clerk. [Passenger List - Joe 1925](#)

His declared calling or occupation on both passenger manifests was teacher. Clara's declared calling or occupation was head of household. Both declared themselves "S" for single, and both stated that they spoke and wrote in English. Joe was going to stay with his uncle; William Meyer who resided at 112 E. 59th Street in Manhattan, Clara was heading to Brooklyn to stay with her uncle Louis Mitschang who resided at 480 Harman Street.

THE NATURALIZATION OF JOSEPH PILATES

Joseph Hubertus Pilates declared his intention for U.S. citizenship on June 20, 1929. It was granted on Feb. 7, 1935, by the Southern District court of New York. According to his sworn affidavit, he was born on Dec. 9, 1883, in MuenchenGladbach, Germany, which is located about 30 minutes west of Dusseldorf. He declared himself a widower, stating that his first wife, Maria died in Germany in 1913. They had one daughter named Helene (known as Leni) on November 30, 1906. She was born in Gelsenkirchen and resided in Germany. According to passenger ship records, Leni came to America to visit her father in 1939. She was 33 years old at the time of her visit. Leni was married to Franz Freidrich and was living in Heumar, Germany which is near Cologne. According to the affidavit for citizenship, Joe also declared a second wife Elfriede, whom he married October 10, 1919 in Westphalia, Germany, which was shortly after his release from the Isle of Man. Joe declared on the document that they were married until her death in 1931. She died in Dusseldorf, Germany.

There were two sworn witnesses to Joe's naturalization petition: Nathaniel Fleischer, a well known publisher and promoter in the boxing world, and Charles Trier, who listed his occupation as a producer of operas and plays. It would be unfair to speculate any connection between Charles and known Pilates teacher, Carola until additional research can be done. Both witnesses stated that their continued association with Pilates began February 1, 1930. Joe Pilates declared his address as 939 8th Avenue and his occupation; Director of Physical Culture.

Anna Clara Zuener declared her intention for citizenship on Nov. 28, 1933. It was granted on Jan. 14, 1937. According to her sworn affidavit, Clara declared she was “not married.” Clara was born on Feb. 6, 1883, in Chemnitz, Germany. Her last declared residence before leaving for America was in Kaiserslautern, Germany. She did not list any previous marriages or children. Clara also stated that she resided at 939 8th Avenue in New York and her occupation was the Assistant Director of Physical Culture. Clara’s two sworn witnesses were Clarence Busch, whose occupation was declared as an artist; and Ruth Coe, whose occupation was declared as a musician. They both stated a continuous association with Clara since Jan. 1, 1932. [Clara's Naturalization Documents](#)

___It is very possible that Joe and Clara met on the boat on their way to America. They may have gone their separate ways, but as of 1937 they both were clearly residing in the same Eighth Avenue location. After conducting searches in New York State as well nationwide, I was not able to find an official certificate of marriage filed to support a legal marriage between Joe and Clara. (New York is *not* a common law marriage state) I did find an additional passenger ship manifest that showed Joe travelled to Cuba on June 18, 1938. Based on the information stated on the manifest, Joe was still declaring his marital status as single.

JOE PILATES’ DRAFT CARD

With the declaration of World War II in 1942, compulsory military laws required Joe to register for the draft at the age of 59. At this point, Joe was the owner of the Pilates Studios located in the Van Dyck Studio building on Eighth Avenue. The Van Dyck Building was known as an “artist’s colony.” His draft card also contained the following information: Race – white; Eyes- blue; Hair – gray; Complexion – ruddy and a cast in right eye. Clara—no last name was listed-- was credited as the “person who will always know your address”.

[Joe's Draft Card 1](#) [Joe's Draft Card 2](#).

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

What motivated Joe to come to America? It is unclear if Nat Fleischer had any influence on Joe moving to America because Joe’s naturalization documents state that they didn’t meet until 1930. However, it is clear that Joe Pilates did *not* come to America to train famous heavyweight boxer Max Schmeling. Max Schmeling didn’t have his first fight in America until 1930. Additional research into the well documented life and career of Max Schmeling did not indicate any association with Joe Pilates as a trainer and instead credited Max Machon as Schmeling’s trainer since 1924.

Even though Joe stated in at least one newspaper interview that he came to America on vacation, there is evidence that Joe came to New York in 1925 to visit patent and trademark attorneys Marks and Clerk, the same attorneys who filed the patents for the Universal Reformer in Berlin, August 27, 1924 and in the United States, August 24, 1925. The passenger manifest for the Albert Ballin state that Joe arrived in New York in October of 1925 to visit the offices of Marks and Clerk at 22 Broadway.

Joe and Clara obviously met on the passenger ship Westphalia in 1926; and even if they were never legally married, isn't it still romantic? My favorite piece of this historical puzzle is that Joe and Clara were both born in 1883, yet in the people weekly story published in 1959, Joe declared his age as 78 and Clara's as 74. They were both 76; but really, who's counting anyway?

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