

The Evolvement of the Pilates Method and its Relation to the Somatic Field⁵

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Introduction

During the past decades the Pilates Method has become a widely popular exercise form throughout the Western world. The method has been hailed as an exceptionally refined and therapeutic functional bodywork approach and its founder Joseph Pilates has been deemed to be almost like a self-made genius, a man way ahead of his time (Ahonen, 2007; Putkisto, 2001). As a dancer, dance teacher, Pilates instructor and scholar with experience of diverse somatic practices, for me, this programmatic publicity seemed somewhat exaggerated. According to my knowledge of what has been alternatively termed as somatics or field of somatic education, Joseph Pilates, is considered as being one among many early pioneers of body-mind work (e.g. Eddy, 2009). He was a child of his time and presumably constructed his exercise method in the midst of an at least somewhat favorable cultural climate. I wanted to learn about and make known the related affiliations.

However, finding reliable details about Pilates' life is difficult, since his legacy is mostly based on oral tradition. He himself co-wrote only two very short books *Your Health* (1934) and *Return to Life Through Contrology* (1945) together with William John Miller (Pilates & Miller, 2000a; 2000b). These books mainly discuss his philosophy on healthy living. They do not offer insight into his life history and mention only very few unambiguous sources of inspiration that shaped his views and ways of working. Despite the scarce detail, by comparing them with historical material describing contemporary events, I decided to look into the kinds of influences that might have supported the evolution of the method and to contemplate how it could be understood to belong to the category of somatic practices.

In this paper, I will primarily concentrate on some historical ties rather than the detailed content of the Pilates Method and its relationship with other somatic approaches. Therefore, I will mostly discuss Joseph Pilates' early life and career in relation to the Body Culture or Gymnastic movement of the early twentieth century in Europe. I will do so by relating orally transmitted and publicly shared characteristics about Pilates' life, as well as by relying on anecdotes from his own writings and some historical details that speak about the Body Culture movement. The main intention is to establish that the Pilates Method is a product of this movement, and in this sense shares roots with many other somatic practices.

Owing to the contents of and pedagogy relating to the Pilates Method, especially as was endorsed by Joseph Pilates himself, not all agree that it is consistent with the central ideals of current somatic practice. Somatic approaches to teaching and learning tend to be student or client based. They offer means to openly explore the idiosyncratic experiences, body structure and functional bodily organization of the client (e.g. Ginot, 2010; Eddy, 2009). Instead, Pilates supported his clients' bodily awareness and functional abilities with predefined movement material and set goals of performance. Nonetheless, I hope that addressing the origins of his work will reveal some of its close ties with the somatic field.

The paper aims to argue that the Pilates Method evolved in affiliation with other somatic pioneers and influences. While so doing, it also points out similarities and differences between the method and some of the principles currently related to somatic practices. However, as there is a lack of in-depth theoretical and historical research

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about the somatic disciplines and Joseph Pilates' life, and since this paper relies on many secondary resources, what it imparts is an informed overview of the explored interrelationship. Some of the details presented require further scrutiny for a more reliable understanding to emerge. (Ginot, 2010; Rouhiainen, 2006)

Somatics Summarized

In order to understand how the Pilates Method is related to the somatic field, some clarification is required about what somatics is. Experiential and holistic bodily approaches that enhance well-being through movement as well as manipulation and are utilized, for example, in teaching and creating dance, have lately been termed somatic practices, especially in an Anglo-American context (Eddy, 2009; 2002; Green, 2007; 2002; Fortin, 2002; Johnson, 1995; 1994). The term 'somatics' was originally coined by philosopher and movement therapist Thomas Hanna in the 1970s. The term denotes those bodily disciplines that appreciate the felt-sense and subjective-experiential viewpoint of the body while aiming at enhancing the psycho-physical integration and functioning of the individual (Hanna, 1995). Hanna (2003, 52) claims that, "to sense what is happening within the soma is to act upon it, i.e. to regulate it". In using the word soma, Hanna is referring to the body as it is perceived from within from a first-person perspective. He defines somatics as the field in which the soma is studied both as the first-person perception of the living body and its first-person regulation (Hanna, 2003).

In his later writings, Hanna continues to describe the overall and rather ambitious goal that he sets for somatics. He describes it as an interdisciplinary theoretical and practical field or a *life science*, as he termed it, that investigates the nature of human life in order to enhance the well-being of people (Hanna, 2003). The term somatics or its field of study is, however, not without its ambiguities. Recently, several dance scholars (e.g. Ginot, 2010; Green, 2007; 2002–2003; 2002; 1999; Moore, 2004a; 2004b; Fortin, 2002; 2001) have shown that there is no general theory discussing the values, norms and beliefs that are integral to somatics or somatic practices. In fact, somatics is viewed from the perspective of and practiced within a wide range of disciplines according to their worldviews and understanding of the body. Therefore, there is a need for further investigation of the somatic disciplines in order to clarify the nature of the principles, processes and goals they involve, as well as the background from which they have emerged.

Philosopher Richard Shusterman (2004; 2000) relates to the above mentioned considerations. Following in the footsteps of Hanna, he introduced a philosophical field of study called *somaesthetics*. In his view this field should explore the ontological and epistemological reaches of our embodiment, how more subjective and objective cultural practices mold our bodies and what engaging in bodily practices can physically teach us. In his view all bodily practices could be considered somatic in one way or another. According to him, exploring and further understanding the practices of embodiment that we subject ourselves to can offer us means for gaining better mastery over our behavior and consequently even support social justice (Shusterman, 2004; 2000).

Nonetheless, currently the main areas of somatic practice can be argued to be in the fields of alternative health care, psycho-physically oriented psychology, education and dance (Eddy, 2009; 2002). The term somatics is now generally used to describe a plethora of different bodily practices that attend to the body through a first-person perspective, are interested in the tacit-knowledge that it encompasses, and regard the process of becoming aware of the body as a path towards change, enhanced bodily functioning and self-understanding. Some of the perhaps most commonly known bodily disciplines that are related to somatics are: the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Body-Mind Centering, Bartenieff Fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis (Green, 2007; Eddy, 2002; 2000). As somatic educator Jill Green (2007) points out, a somatic approach has been increasingly adopted, especially in dance education and research. Consequently, the pedagogical implications of somatic practice have started to be scrutinized. Somatic experience has also been utilized as a research methodology and its social significance has been explored (Green, 2007).

Precursors to the Somatic Field

Even if no encompassing understanding exists about what somatics is, there are a few writers who have addressed the heritage from which the somatic field has evolved (Moore, 2004a; 2004b; Fortin, 2002; 2001; Johnson, 1995; 1994; Murphy, 1992; Cottingham, 1985). An influential somatic practitioner and theorist, Don Hanlon Johnson (1994), argues that the roots of somatics date back more than a hundred years and are related to the Body Culture or Gymnastic movement of Central and Northern Europe as well as the Eastern United States. The overall movement entailed an unprecedented interest in physical culture and permeated among other things the arts, education, sports, philosophy and the sciences of the time. Within it there were pioneering therapeutic movement and bodywork practitioners who explored sensory and expressive embodiment. However, a lot of the early orally transmitted history of these early practitioners has been lost. In addition, the First and Second World Wars interrupted the evolution of the heritage (Johnson, 1994). Moreover, according to Toepfer (1997, 384), an expert in theatre studies, the physical movement disciplines of the early 20th century in Europe were organized as competitive and self-protective schools of thought and individual agents. If this is the case, it is no wonder that those forerunners who wrote about their work seldom mentioned any colleagues or particular trends in the field of physical education that influenced their thinking. Joseph Pilates could be considered an example of this kind of an attitude, as he has been noted to have been very protective of his work and did not write about the background from which his ideas and solutions emerged (Latey, 2002; 2001b).

Even if it is unlikely that a cultural process or period begins with one moment or one single event, Johnson's argument is informative (e.g. Carter, 2004; Postlewait, 1988). Equally informative is the following categorization as a preliminary attempt to delineate the evolution of the somatic field in a linear fashion. Drawing on Johnson's understanding of the roots of somatics, movement therapist Michele Mangione (1993), dance scholar and educator Sylvie Fortin (2002; 2001) and movement analyst Carol-Lynne Moore (2004a) have outlined the historical development of the somatic field as a periodical process and by determining some of its precursors. According to them, it was between the 1900s and 1930s that the pioneers began devising their methods that were prompted by self-healing considerations and the overall well-being of people. Among the pioneers are: Frederick Matthias Alexander, Else Gindler, Bess Mensendieck, Joseph Pilates, Mabel E. Todd, Rudolf Laban and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. From the 1930s and until the 1970s individual lineages of bodywork became more established by the work of the students of the former pioneers. The students include: Lulu Sweigard, Carola Speads, Charlotte Selver, Irmgard Bartenieff, Eve Gentry, Moshe Feldenkrais and Gerda Alexander. Between the 1970s and 1990s different somatic methods were integrated into therapeutic, psychological, educational and artistic domains, and the development of idiosyncratic approaches by individual instructors on the basis of the work of the pioneers began to emerge more clearly. Finally, from 1990s onwards the field has become increasingly international. A professionalization as well as an institutionalization of its members and practices is pursued more actively (Moore, 2004a; Fortin, 2002; 2001; Mangione, 1993; see also Rouhiainen, 2006).

In many cases the lives and work, as well as the interconnections between the above-mentioned bodywork or somatic practitioners, still need detailed investigation for a better understanding of their impact. However, interestingly enough, the work of many of the pioneers was inspired by concerns about their own health. They were mostly self-educated; they developed their methods through empirical observation and experimentation (Moore, 2004a; Johnson, 1994).⁶ At the moment, the heritage of different somatic orientations or schools is being increasingly investigated and documented. Also, a host of systematic educational programs transmitting and developing these

6 Nonetheless, there are a few academically educated predecessors in the field of bodywork. For example, Bess Mensendieck was a medical doctor. Another example is Mabel E. Todd, who developed a novel approach that utilized images to enhance the functioning of the muscular-skeletal system in the beginning of the 20th century. She too had an education in medicine and continued to work in an academic context. (e.g. Ruyter, 1999; Todd, 1974)

heritages have been and continue to be established. In addition, the overall nature of the somatic movement is being scrutinized.

The Pilates Method in Brief

German-born Joseph Hubertus Pilates lived from 1880–1967. He began formulating a special exercise program during the latter part of the 1910s in England and Germany. He continued to refine the method he termed *Control-ogy* in New York when he emigrated there in the mid-1920s. Here especially dancers had a strong influence on the evolution of the method.^{7–8} The program is designed to enhance good posture and to increase both the strength and flexibility of the body through exercises done with the apparatus that Pilates himself devised. The method teaches clients to move from a stable core or with a well-supported trunk. It also enhances body awareness and control in challenging the body to move according to a variety of complex movement patterns. As much of the work is done either in a prone or supine position, which to an extent frees the body from the effects of gravity, and with specialist equipment, it is also used quite efficiently for the rehabilitation of diverse injuries or problems associated with the musculoskeletal system. Pilates himself emphasized the importance of the mind-body connection, deep breathing, a flexible spine, a lean and strong musculature and proper alignment – which for him like to many of his contemporaries – meant a military posture – as well as the use of deep muscles for the healthy functioning of the body. He was also proponent of adequate rest and exercise, proper diet and good hygiene. (Latey, 2002; 2001a; 2001b; Pilates & Miller, 2000a; 2000b)

After the death of Joseph Pilates his disciples continued to develop the method further.⁹ Currently, there is a whole host of Pilates-based approaches to body conditioning, some of which have taken into consideration recent findings in the field of sports medicine and science or have been influenced by softer approaches to rehabilitation and fitness (Latey, 2001a; 2001b). In fact, owing to the diverse applications of the method and the changes it has undergone, Penelope Latey (2001a; 2001b) considers the practice of the Pilates Method to have moved into its modern phase. In recent years, in the United States, there has even been a concerted effort to keep alive and make known the classical form of the method as taught by Pilates himself, for example, by the Pilates Method Alliance.¹⁰

In some sources the Pilates Method is mentioned as a somatic approach (Eddy, 2009; Allison, 1999; Knaster, 1996). However, the exercises of the Pilates Method are not open-ended. They involve a defined goal and require a specific manner of performance. In addition, in its classical form, the method was a vigorous regime executed according to a command style of pedagogy. Perhaps owing to these features that are still to an extent visible in current practice, there has been some prejudice against placing the Pilates Method in the somatic category. Nonetheless, if we think of Hanna's emphasis on first-person perception and bodily regulation, the Pilates Method could be considered a somatic practice. Through concentration¹¹ it attunes individuals to focus on the functions and the felt-sense of

7 He collaborated there with several dance artists, most notably Ted Shawn. All in all, Pilates had a good reputation for helping dancers with injuries, for example, and was recommended by Martha Graham, George Balanchine and Hanya Holm. Several of the instructors he trained had a background in dance. Among them are Eve Gentry and Ron Fletcher. (Priluck, 2005; *A History of Pilates*, 2005; Hering, 1956)

8 Jill Green (2007) mentions that one of the impetuses for the growth of somatic thought in dance in the United States came from the work of Martha Myers, who was the dean of the *American Dance Festival*. Myers introduced some body therapy practices supportive of dance in the *Dance Magazine* in 1989. *The Pilates Method* was amongst those introduced (Myers, 1989).

9 This exemplifies the close tie that the Pilates Method continued to have with dance, even after Pilates' death. Some of the still living first generation instructors trained by Joseph and Clara Pilates are Kathy Grant, Mary Bowen, Ron Fletcher, Romana Kryzanowska and Lolita San Miguel. Many of them had a dance background. Clara Pilates was Joseph's wife, who devoted her life to working with him. (Joseph, 2005; King, 1992)

10 For example, the 4th International Educational Conference of the *Pilates Method Alliance* in 2004 discussed the necessity of disseminating knowledge about the history and classical form of the Pilates Method, while supporting the development of new approaches. This discussion took place in a panel session under the rubric: Understanding the Pilates Principles.

11 Concentration is one of the principles that direct the manner in which Pilates exercises ought to be performed. Drawing on what they had learned from Joseph Pilates, Gail Eisen and Philip Friedman (1980) first crystallized these principles as centering, control, precision, breathing and flowing movement. Currently these are generally considered the basic principles of the Pilates Method (Latey 2001a).

their bodies, thus enhancing bodily awareness, and in its exercises it asks individuals to regulate or re-educate their movement patterns and movement style through specific workouts. Obviously, the overall aim of the method is to enhance well-being and health.

The Cultural Environment and Physical Education at the Turn of the 20th Century in Germany

In the following paragraphs I will offer some contextual information on the first phase of the origins of the somatic field from a European perspective. I will interlink these notions with anecdotes from Pilates' life and writings in the subsequent sections of the paper.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries the modernization and rationalization of Western culture affected the way the body was understood and utilized in everyday life in Middle and Northern Europe. European countries were quickly developing into urban, industrialized and increasingly capitalistic societies with problems of over-population, poverty and health. The industrial revolution and urban life-style that increased population densities also led to an increase in contagious diseases and a general decline in health.

In the midst of these rather new circumstances and related problems, Western culture began striving for a "new humanity" in which people with a strong body and healthy attitude towards life could meet the challenges of the day. There was strong belief in technological and rational means of overcoming the problems that accompanied modernization. Western culture was more fascinated with calculation, measurement, control and cultivation than ever before. The problems of society and its urban and industrialized lifestyle were increasingly related to problems with the psychological and bodily functions of the individual. Biology and physiology became appreciated as sciences as did psychology. An overall ideology suggested that people should attain psychological self-control and through it regulate their bodies and lives productively for society. The body became a social issue that influenced different social classes and both genders.¹² The democratization of the body happened partially through the popularization of scientific knowledge. Hygiene emerged and this represented a field of knowledge that spread instructive and scientifically grounded information on right and good forms of life to the general public. (Ekenstam, 1993; Mäkinen, 1992)

In the 19th century Germany, the work of physical educators such as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and Adolf Spiess was widely adopted into the everyday life of citizens. The physical training program that Jahn created and advocated in the books he wrote came to be practiced throughout Germany, in small towns as well as in large cities. Interestingly, his exercise regime included different kinds of apparatus. Adolph Spiess created modern school gymnastics as he was an enthusiast of physical fitness for boys and girls. He also wrote several books. Spiess' efforts culminated in 1860, when all boys' schools in Germany were ordered to teach gymnastics. (Leonard & Affleck, 1947 cited in Door & Leach, 1999) In fact, according to professor in Slavic languages and literature Harold Segel (1998), the nationalism of Jahn's philosophy on physical training was deeply rooted in German culture. Physical culture as a mass movement came to be looked upon not only as a source of national pride, but perhaps more importantly, as source of national strength.

The Early Years of Pilates' Life and Career

Most biographical notes on Joseph Pilates agree that he was born in a small town near Düsseldorf in Germany in 1880. His father was a prizewinning gymnast and his mother a naturopath (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005). These circumstances most likely provided him with an environment that encouraged a healthy life-style and

12 For example, the suffrage movement that addressed the working conditions as well as educational and voting rights of women emerged. Reform dresses for women without corsets were created. Young people aimed to free their bodies from the stiffness of previous societal norms and constraints of industrialization through expressive dance, vegetarian diets, by living in natural surroundings of the woods and forms of nudity. (cf. Geuter et. al., 2010; Segel, 1998)

involvement in sports, gymnastics and even the developing field of alternative health practices. However, Pilates is often described as having been a sickly child. He is said to have suffered from rickets, asthma, rheumatic fever and even tuberculosis. (Reyneke, 2002; Latey, 2002; 2001a; 2001b; *A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005) Because of his health problems it is presumed that he already embarked on his journey into the world of fitness and health as a youngster. Pilates has been described as having started bodybuilding at a very young age. He is said to have developed such a well-defined musculature that he was asked to pose for anatomy charts as early as the age of fourteen. But he seems to have had an overall interest in sports and exercise. As a teenager he is also said to have enjoyed diving, skiing and gymnastics. He might have even competed successfully in gymnastics (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Door & Leach, 1999).

As a schoolboy Pilates himself must have had experience of the exercise regimes mentioned in the previous section. I believe that a lot of his philosophy is based on the rational, technocratic and even nationalistic ideals prevalent in the physical education of the time. After all, with his exercise program he strived to improve the overall health of his clients and was interested in the body-mind connection, with an emphasis on conscious control of one's actions and life. From the perspective of Contrology he states that the balance of the mind and body mean the following:

It is the conscious control of all muscular movements of the body. It is the correct utilization and application of the leverage principles afforded by the bones comprising the skeletal framework of the body. It is complete knowledge of the mechanisms of the body and full understanding of the principles of equilibrium and gravity as applied to the movements of the body in motion, at rest and in sleep. . . Suffice to say that incorrect habits are responsible for most of our ailments, if not all of them. Equally true is the statement that only through proper education is it possible to replace bad habits with good ones. (Pilates & Miller, 2000a, 20)

And he believed that

Contrology develops the body uniformly, corrects wrong posture, restores physical vitality, invigorates the mind, and elevates the spirit. (Pilates & Miller 2000a, 53)

Joseph Pilates continued to pursue exercise and fitness after his teenage years. In his early adult life he became a professional boxer and taught self-defense. Allegedly, his professional work also led him to explore Yoga, Karate, Zen meditation and the exercise regimes of the ancient Greeks and Romans. (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Reyneke, 2002; Latey, 2002; 2001a; 2001b) It was not uncommon that the classical Greek athlete served as a role model. During that time in Germany there was a general interest in antiquity, classical Greek civilization and paganism (Segel, 1998). As a result of the tumultuous changes taking place in society, one way of looking for answers or alternatives was to idealize the past (Olsson, 1999). In this vein the Romans and Etruscans also had their admirers due to their manly virtues and an idealized pre-Christian paganism (Segel, 1998).

Eugen Sandow (1867–1925) with his bodybuilding models from Greek and Roman sculptures could be thought to exemplify the quest for manly virility and strength that Jahn related to nationalistic ideals. German-born Sandow is considered the first modern bodybuilder, and he gained international recognition with his variety show in which he displayed his muscles and strength. Early in his career he, like Pilates, posed for anatomy charts before leaving Germany in the late 1880s. After this he mainly worked in England and the United States and became an all-around fitness entrepreneur. He also wrote several books on bodybuilding, some of which were translated into other languages than English, and he devised specific types of workout apparatus of his own. (*The Life of Eugen Sandow*, 2005; Segel, 1998)

Another good example of the influence of antiquity was the rebirth of the Olympics in 1896 – an issue publicly discussed and one that gained popularity as the Olympic movement began to flourish (Latey, 2001a). The

German team of gymnasts won a medal at the first Olympics. This occasion must have empowered the practice of gymnastic in Germany. (Segel, 1998) This was also a phenomenon that occurred during Pilates' teenage years. Many decades later, Pilates still revered the Ancient Greeks. He referred to them in both of his books (Pilates & Miller, 2000a; 2000b). In his second book he wrote:

Many in the ancient world wisely adopted as their own the Latin motto, *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sane mind in a sound body). The classical Greeks as a people displayed even greater wisdom when they practiced what they preached and thus as a culture came nearest to actually achieving this goal. (Pilates & Miller, 2000a, 63)

The legend told of Pilates' early life suggests that he was heavily affected by the above-discussed influences of his time as he pursued sports, gymnastics and a career in movement. His interest in Asian forms of bodily practice also conformed with the cultural climate in Germany. The physical movement was "accompanied by a repudiation of organized religion" and the Christian church lost followers (Segel, 1998, 219). However, since people still had an interest in the spiritual dimension, they sought new outlets by turning towards alternative beliefs and practices. Hinduism and Buddhism were regarded as potential options and considered "more mystical and less worldly than either Christianity or Judaism" (Segel 1998, 219). Related practices such as Zen meditation and Yoga became known to the European people. In fact, Pilates must have been rather impressed by Yoga as the mat-exercises that he demonstrates in his last book, *Return to Life Through Contrology*, are very reminiscent of traditional yoga postures. Contrology also pays a lot attention to breathing and its exercises are performed using the rhythm of the breath, which is also common to Yoga.

Shaping Contrology

However, it was actually in England that Pilates started to devise his exercise program. Sources vary on the date and his reasons for moving there. Others claim that he moved to England in 1911 and that he worked as a boxer and self-defense instructor (Reyneke, 2002; Latey, 2001a; Hering, 1956). But one version of the story states that he became a circus performer and toured England with his troupe in 1914. According to this version, Pilates and his brother performed a Greek statue act together. (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005) This suggests a similar variety number or genre of variety that Eugen Sandow is said to have very successfully endorsed when displaying the strength and form of his body.¹³ Door and Leach (1999) argue that the most common reason for Germans going to Britain before World War I was financial and suggest that this also applied to Pilates. And it does seem to be the case that Pilates went to England to work.

During the First World War, that lasted from 1914 to 1918, Pilates was interned in England as a German national. He first stayed at a camp for enemy aliens in Lancaster. There he refined his ideas about health and body-building and taught his fellow inmates self-defense and wrestling. It was in this camp that he began devising his own set of exercises that developed into Contrology in this camp. (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Latey, 2001a; 2001b; Friedman & Eisen, 1980; Hering, 1956.)¹⁴ In 1915, Pilates was transferred to Knockaloe Camp on the Isle of Man. There he acted as a kind of nurse for other internees who suffered from wartime diseases and incarceration. Referring to Cesarani and Kushner (1993), Door and Leach (1999) surmise that he was one of the hospital attendants at the camp. These were paid positions for which any internee could volunteer. As a means of

13 When I think of Pilates performing as a Greek statue, what comes to my mind are the photographs taken of Pilates at his summer place and his studio. In them, he is often seen wearing boxer shorts. He also poses by lifting his chest and standing very erect – as if he was presenting the strength and health of his body. Pilates is said to have run around several blocks each morning only wearing boxer shorts, despite the season in New York. Emphasizing the benefits of breathing fresh air and toughening one's body in the cold for health was one agenda of hygiene and Body Culture. In fact, in the photos from the studio Pilates' clients too are shown only to wear shorts or jumpsuits. (e.g. *A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Pilates & Miller, 2000a; Hering 1956)

14 According to Friedman and Eisen (1980), Pilates boasted that none of his inmates in Lancaster died from the 1918 influenza pandemic which took the lives of thousands of Europeans.

rehabilitation for his bedridden inmates, he began to experiment with bedsprings. He attached them to the ends of the patients' beds so that they could do exercises with resistance while still bed-bound. He noticed that the muscle tone of patients recovered more rapidly when they worked with the springs. With this idea in mind he began developing and devising the equipment that became essential to Contrology. (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Latey, 2001a; 2001b; Friedman & Eisen, 1980; Hering 1956)

After the war, perhaps in 1919, Pilates returned to Germany and settled in Hamburg (Door & Leach, 1999). There he continued to teach self-defense and physical training, this time for the Hamburg Military Police, as well as personal clients (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005; Reyneke, 2002; Latey, 2001a; Friedman & Eisen, 1980). He also developed his equipment by refining existing and inventing new types.¹⁵ Many of the spring-based machines that support moving the trunk and extremities with resistance in a supine position still belong to the Pilates Method and make it a special form of exercise. Indirectly at least, he must have been influenced by other bodywork professionals such as Else Gindler, Bess Mensendieck and Leo Kofler who were working in Germany at the time. According to Margaret Brown and Betty Sommer, German gymnastics became more professionalized in the 1920s. Among other things, an important conference on "Creative Methods of Physical Education" was held in 1922 in Berlin and gave impetus to the progress of new developments in gymnastics. Also, just before Pilates left the country, in 1925, the "Deutscher Gymnastik-Bund" was founded. It aimed to promote new approaches to gymnastics and served as a voluntary accrediting organization for its members. For example, the schools of Else Gindler, Hede Kallmeyer, Rudolf Laban and Bess Mensendieck joined the Bund. (Brown & Sommer, 1969)

Hede Kallmeyer worked in Berlin and Bess Mesendieck (1861–1957) in Hamburg training others to teach their methods that underlined releasing excess tension in and good dynamic alignment of the body. When a film on Gymnastic was released in Germany in 1925, this more gentle form of physical education with breathing and movement gained a broader public profile. (Latey, 2001a; Knaster, 1996.) Latey believes that Pilates was also aware of the system that Francoise Delsarte (1811–1879) created, as well as Leo Kofler's and Else Gindler's (1885–1961) work. All of them advocated the importance of good breathing and the ease and rhythmic qualities of bodily motion. Following what has been termed 'reform gymnastic' they proposed an approach whereby externally imposed biomechanical goals were replaced by developing students inner awareness of their bodies and their requirements. (Geuter et. al., 2010; Latey, 2001b; Toepfer, 1997; Johnson, 1995)

This might also have had an effect on Pilates' approach to movement. After all, he came to emphasize the importance of good breathing for health and the meaning of smooth and flowing movement that engages the whole body in order to enhance proper bodily functioning. According to Latey the early style of Pilates' method was "oriented towards strength work and reminiscent of boxing training" (Latey, 2001a, 277). In a 1955 video in which Pilates instructs his pupil Eve Gentry, the movement style is more flowing and similar to that of modern dance (Latey, 2001a; Bruce Gentry: J. Pilates & E. Gentry, 1955). In his book *Return to Life Through Contrology* Pilates writes that

Constantly keep in mind the fact that you are not interested in developing bulging muscles

15 He has allegedly said: "I invented all these machines. Began back in Germany, was there until 1925 used to exercise rheumatic patients. I thought, why use My strength? So I made a machine to do it for me. Look, you see it resists your movements in just the right way so those inner muscles really have to work against it. That way you can concentrate on movement. You must always do it slowly and smoothly. Then your whole body is in it" (*A History of Joseph Hubertus Pilates*, 2005, np.). Compared with other kinds of exercise equipment using resistance, perhaps the very fact that Pilates began using springs is what made his exercise form so specific. The use of springs in exercise machines evokes the use of both concentric and eccentric muscle work to create fluent and controlled movement. It seems that the best inventions that Pilates made were those that he continued to use in the United States (Hering, 1956). Currently his main types of apparatus are known as the 1) the Cadillac, Rack or Trapeze – a four-posted bed with various springs and hanging bars, 2) the Universal Reformer – a sliding platform with springs and straps, 3) The Wunda Chair – a wooden box with a moving peddle attached to the box through springs, 4) the High Barrel – a wooden arch over one meter high with an attached ladder, 5) the Low Barrel – a half-meter high arch with a seat. In addition, Pilates created many kinds of smaller pieces of equipment. The ones that are mostly used today are the Magic Circle, which is a resilient circle with handles that can be pressed together, and the Bar, which is a simple wooden stick used to assist in some exercises.

but rather flexible ones. Bulging muscles hinder the attainment of flexibility because overdeveloped muscles interfere with the proper development of underdeveloped muscles. True flexibility can be achieved only when all muscles are uniformly developed. (Pilates & Miller, 2000a, 58)

According to several accounts of Pilates' life he also met dance artist Rudolf Laban during the years he spent in Hamburg. Allegedly Laban sat in and watched Pilates work in his studio, took notes of what he observed and included some of Pilates' bodybuilding exercises into his own teaching routines (Latey, 2001a; Friedman & Eisen, 1980; Hering, 1956). Hering (1956), Friedman and Eisen (1980) claim these exercises were transmitted from Laban to Mary Wigman and from her to Hanya Holm. They became part of the warm-up series of their dance techniques. Door and Leach (1999) suggest a different scenario. Laban was in Hamburg in 1923, but he and Wigman had already parted company in 1917. Wigman was seriously ill until 1918, and when she returned to performing in 1919 she did so in Dresden. (Door & Leach, 1999) As an anecdote, according to the website of The Pilates Center, it was probably in the 1940s in America that Hanya Holm collaborated with Pilates and incorporated his exercises into her own dance technique (*A History of Pilates*, 2005).

Nonetheless, Laban and Pilates could have met, or at least, Pilates was probably aware of Laban's growing reputation and work. Laban dance schools were established throughout Germany during the 1920s, and he himself set up a theatre and dance studio in Hamburg in 1922 (Hodgson & Preston-Dunlop, 1990). When speculating about whether or not Laban and Pilates had collaborated or had had any influence on each other, a few similarities in their approach to movement spring to mind. In the realm of fitness Laban advocated understanding movement as the unification of body and mind and emphasized that exercise should include emotive or expressive qualities for the health of the total human being (Hodgson & Preston-Dunlop, 1990). In his books, Pilates in turn emphasizes the importance of the unity or balance of the mind and body. When instructing people how to do his exercises he also speaks about the necessity of control and underlines the importance of fluid or flowing movement (Pilates & Miller, 2000a; 2000b). In his dance and movement theory Laban defined flow as a dynamic quality that is related to the inner attitude of control of the self and the body. However, these interesting interlinks in movement philosophy may have emerged as the result of other reasons than purely the influence Laban and Pilates had on each other. It seems to have been rather common that diverse forms of bodywork advocated flowing movement and the connection of the mind and the body.

Further Influences in German Body Culture

The period after the First World War and before Pilates moved to New York in 1926 must have offered him abundant inspiration. In his book *Empire of Ecstasy* (1997), Karl Toepfer (1997) discusses the continuation of German Body Culture that had its heyday at the beginning of the 20th century in somewhat different manner to that so far presented in this paper. Instead of considering it to be a direct continuation of rationalistic and technocratic beliefs, he describes it as a mode "of aesthetic performance that collapses conventional distinctions between mind and body, subject and object, self and world" (Toepfer, 1997, 7). He suggests that the Body Culture mania of the 1920s, especially, was an intense reaction to the excessive rationalization and mechanization of European civilization, whose malignant consequence was the war. It involved attempts to create a harmonious reconciliation with nature through the body. Toepfer finds that this happened especially through the categories of nudity and physical movement. The latter he argues was particularly influenced by early German modern dance, which he describes as the "most turbulent dance culture in history" (Toepfer, 1997, 7).

Until the Second World War that began in 1939 in Germany, there was a vibrant new dance scene that was variously called *Modernen Tanz*, *Absoluter Tanz*, *Freier Tanz*, *Tanzkunst* or *Ausdruckstanz*. It was linked to the ideals of a new national identity of the modern individual, individualism and the liberation of sexual identity as

well as a return to nature and health (Preston-Dunlop & Lahusen, 1990). In constructing a modern body in the first decades of the 20th century, German Body Culture focused on the body as a source of meanings that hitherto had remained hidden. Gymnastics and dance brought people closer to the unconscious identity of life itself, blood, breath, pulse and rhythm (Toepfer, 1997).

While it is known that artists and alternative groups were interested in the irrational and spiritual potential of the humankind, after the rational ideals of the previous decades and the first male gymnasts of the 19th century, Toepfer points out that the gymnasts at the beginning of the 20th century were likewise interested. He claims that they also focused on locating the unconscious foundation of power and vitality in the irrational (Toepfer, 1997). In this context there were gymnastic teachers who abandoned the traditional approach to teaching movement that included apparatus and uniform execution of movement. Instead they allowed their students a wider range of freedom to individually explore their experiences and develop their somatic behavior (Geuter et. al., 2010).

Brown and Sommer reveal something of the close ties between dance and gymnastics by stating that the members of Deutscher Gymnastik Bund initially included schools of dance. But it soon became evident that there was such a big difference between movement education and dance training and performance that eventually dance practitioners formed their own organization. (Brown & Sommer, 1969) Toepfer also points out that Body Culture had serious export value for Germany and numerous personalities with international careers developed German ideas abroad (Toepfer, 1997). Pilates moved to New York and certainly succeeded in creating an international career, at least posthumously. But I question the extent to which Pilates was fascinated with the irrational realm, as his books repeatedly speak about the importance of requiring proper knowledge about the functions of the body, the necessity of conscious control of movements and precise physical performance in order to overcome bad, that is unhealthy, habits and regain vitality (Pilates & Miller, 2000a; 2000b). Still, the vital and developing practice of physical education that existed during the final years that Pilates spent in Germany seem to have set him on a path that found its true realization in New York where he continued to work with an increasing number of dancers.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have tried to establish how it was possible for Pilates to begin a career in fitness and why his work began to take the form that it eventually did. He lived in a cultural climate that supported his interests in the sports, bodywork and health. The Body Culture movement of the turn of the 20th century and the developments in physical education that took place in Germany in the 1920s provided him with ample sources of inspiration and even role models to follow. Pilates continued to develop his method in New York, where his career actually took off. There he collaborated with people directly linked to forms of bodywork that we now unquestionably consider somatic practices. However, as Pilates' early work undoubtedly belongs to the German Body Culture movement, it likewise shares roots with the somatic field. Nonetheless, it is worth underlining that there were competing schools of thought and development within German Body Culture. The more traditional gymnasts worked with apparatus and movements were executed according to the teachers' commands with physiotherapeutic and orthopedic goals. The reform gymnasts aimed at developing an awareness of idiosyncratic embodied experiences, thus enhancing the well-being of individuals. Pilates seems to have worked at the crossroads of these influences. This I argue should not place his work in a speculative position within the somatic field. Instead it highlights a general tension. In addition to providing means to enhance self-awareness and improving behavior on subjective grounds, dance scholar Isabelle Ginot (2010) argues that somatic practices continue to serve prophylactic objectives. They protect professional dancers and athletes from having accidents, provide functional rehabilitation and support the improvement of virtuosity in movement performance (Ginot, 2010).

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