Joseph H. Pilates was born in 1883 in Mönchengladbach, Germany. He was a small and sickly child who suffered from asthma, rickets and rheumatic fever.  
His father was a prizewinning gymnast and his mother was a naturopath.   
A family physician gave him a discarded anatomy book, Joseph stated “I learned every page, every part of the body. I moved each part as I memorized it. As a child, I was laying in the woods for hours, hiding and watching the animals move, how the mothers taught the young.”   
He studied both Eastern and Western forms of exercise including yoga, Zen, and ancient Greek and Roman regimens. By the time he was 14 he had worked so hard and developed his body to the point that he was modelling for anatomy charts.

Growing up in Germany, he achieved some success as a boxer and gymnast – in addition to be a skilled skier and diver. He was married twice in Germany and had one child with his first wife Maria, who died in 1913. his second wife Elfrieda died in 1931.

In 1914, during WWI, he was interned, along with other German citizens in Lancaster, England. There he taught wrestling and self-defense, boasting that his students would emerge stronger than before their internment. In this place he began devising his system of original exercises that later became “Contrology.” He was transferred to another internment camp on the Isle of Man where he became kind of a nurse and worked with many internees who suffered from wartime diseases and incarceration. He then began devising equipment to rehabilitate them, he took the springs from the beds and formed exercise apparatus for the bedridden. In 1918, a terrible epidemic of influenza swept the world, killing millions of people, tens of thousands in England. None of Joe’s followers succumbed even though the camps were the hardest hit.

After the war, Joe returned to Germany and began training the Hamburg Military Police in self-defense and physical training as well as taking on personal clients. “I invented all these machines. when I got back in Germany, was there until 1925, rehabilitating rheumatic patients. I thought, why to 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 must 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.” It was at this time that he met Rudolf von Laban, a famous movement analyst, who is said to have incorporated some of Joe’s theories and exercises into his own work. Mary Wigman, a famous German dancer and choreographer was a student of Joe’s and used his exercises in her dance class warm-up.

In 1925 he was invited to train the New German Army but because he was not happy with the political direction of Germany he decided to leave. On the urging of boxing expert, Nat Fleischer, and with the aid of Max Schmelling he decided to come to the U.S. He traveled twice to America, and on the way he met his future wife, Clara. She was a kindergarten teacher who was suffering from arthritic pain and Joe worked with her on the boat to heal her.

Upon arriving, they settled in New York City and opened a gym at 939 Eighth Ave, in the same building as several dance studios and rehearsal space. It was this proximity that made “Contrology” such an intrinsic part of many dancers’ training and rehab work and many were sent to Joe to be “fixed.” George Balanchine, the famous choreographer, studied with Joe and sent many of his dancers to Pilates for strengthening and “balancing” as well as rehabilitation, as did another famous dancer/choreographer, Martha Graham. From 1939 to 1951 Joe and Clara went every summer to Jacob’s Pillow, a well-known dance camp in the Berkshire Mountains. He was a friend and teacher to such renowned dancer/choreographers as Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis, Martha Graham and Jerome Robbins and many required their dancers to go to Joe.   
Hanya Holm even incorporated Joe’s exercises into her students’ lessons.   
However, Joe counted many socialites as well as plumbers and doctors, to list a few, as his clients as well. Joe called himself “Director of Physical Culture.”

Joe felt his work was “50 years ahead of his time.” He believed in “natural movements” with the emphasis on doing and being. He has stated, “Everything should be smooth, like a cat. The exercises are done lying, sitting, kneeling, etc., to avoid excess strain on the heart and lungs.”   
Joe called himself “Director of Physical Culture.”

Although Joseph Pilates was a health guru, he believed in fitness supporting your life’s rich goals. He was renowned for liking cigars, whisky and women and was to be seen running on Manhattan streets, in the dead of winter, in a bikini! He registered many patents with the US Patent and Trademark Office beginning in 1930, including a catapult, the V-Bed, the Wunda Chair and several Reformers.   
Joe and Clara had many famous dancers, musicians, socialites and actors as clients, but also as well as regular working-class people.

In January 1966 there was a fire in their building. Joe returned to his studio to try and save anything possible and fell through burnt out floorboards, hanging on by his hands from a beam for quite some time until rescued by firefighters.   
It is assumed that this incident directly led to his death in October 1967, at the age of 84.   
Clara, regarded by many as the more superb teacher, continued to teach and run the studio until her death 10 years.  
later, in 1977, Romana Kryzanowska took over the business and has dedicated her life to teaching Joe’s work as he devised it.