

PROFILE

Esther Fairfax

BY SIMON YAFFE

It is fair to say that Esther Fairfax endured a more than rocky relationship with her mother, Lotte Berk.

Her formative years were characterised by mental and physical abuse from her mother — and she was also raped when she was 15 by a stage producer.

Esther, who attempted suicide, also endured a poverty-stricken marriage to an alcoholic.

Esther has, though, made it to 83 and is still teaching exercise regime The Lotte Berk Method, which was created by her mother.

The method counts such names as Britt Ekland, Joan Collins and Barbra Streisand among its fans.

Esther, who teaches the technique at her studio in Berkshire, told me: “I had more than a complicated relationship with my mother.

“She was neurotic, emotional and dramatic, but also charismatic, with a tongue as sharp as a razor.”

Esther wrote *My Improper Mother and Me* seven years ago, charting her home life.

Esther was four when she left her native Germany in 1938 with her mother and father, Ernest, due to the rise of the Nazis.

Lotte was born Lieselotte Heymansohn in Cologne to Jewish parents.

She left behind a promising modern ballet career when she escaped Germany with Ernest, who was a prominent dancer and choreographer, and Esther.

She developed her exercise method, which blended elements

I grew up feeling lost and abandoned

of yoga and dance with stretches and pelvic gyrations, in the 1950s.

And, while Lotte became such a prominent name, it was to the detriment of Esther's childhood.

Esther said: “I don't think I was treated badly, but I was neglected. I grew up feeling lost and abandoned and because of that, I was a passive child.

“The more quiet I was and the less intrusive, the more my mother gave me compliments.

“I had to sit in a corner and be quiet and, if I did that, she was happy with me.”

Lotte's strange attitude to her daughter was exemplified when Esther was 15.

She was raped by a producer of a show in which Lotte was performing — but Esther was told to keep it quiet.

“It was almost the culture of the day, not to bring something like that up, which I know is an awful thing to say,” she said.

“My parents told me not to say anything because they were frightened of losing their jobs.

“Only when I became an adult did I realise it was awful that they didn't support me, even though it didn't seem like that at the time.”

When the Berks arrived in the UK, they settled in Birmingham as Ernest, who had studied architecture, worked for the government, helping to design bridges and tanks to aid the war effort.

Soon after, they moved to London and Esther grew up in Shepherd's Bush.

Abusive mum and alcoholic husband contribute to the story of Esther



But as her mother's fame began to grow, Esther was sent to live with different families and suffered bullying at some of them.

She also attended numerous boarding schools and, after that, headed to Paris, where she worked in a nightclub.

Esther added: “I walked around a club wearing a lot of feathers on my head and glittery shoes — and not much else!”

Back in London, at a party hosted by poet Dylan Thomas, she met John Fairfax, who was also a poet.

They married and had two children, Michael and Jo, but life was extremely difficult.

“John was an alcoholic and would not go out to work if possible,” Esther explained.

“We ended up living hand to mouth in cottages which had been condemned with no running water or a lavatory.

“We would often walk miles to find fields where cabbages were growing just so we could steal them.

“My mother didn't understand it at all, but when you are in love, it often bears the brunt of hard times.”

As Esther had put on extra weight following her pregnancies, she joined one of Lotte's classes.

Lotte paid Esther's fare to London and took her out for lunch once a week.

Eventually, she trained her daughter in the technique.

However, when Esther took on the method herself and landed a column in a women's magazine, Lotte was furious.

Esther said: “I don't think she realised how possessive she was



DRAMATIC: Lotte Berk

about her work.

“I also started to appear on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* and she was eaten up with jealousy.

“My mother was attractive and charismatic and I didn't have a high regard for myself, so I could not understand it.”

In a bid to placate Lotte, Esther gave it all up — only to pique her mother's anger more.

“She thought I was stupid to do that and, looking back, I was,” Esther added.

Eventually, everything became too much for her and, when she was in her mid-30s, Esther tried to take her own life.

But even such drastic action prompted little sympathy from Lotte. Esther recalled: “She came to visit me in hospital and was very angry.

“Her first words to me, after I'd

Mother was attractive and charismatic

had my stomach pumped, were, ‘Look what you have done to me’, in a very dramatic way. Her eyes were black with fury.

“I was always trying to please her, but it was never enough.”

She spent the next nine years in what she labelled a “state of misery”.

Unhappy in her marriage and poverty-stricken, one weekend, when her husband was away, Esther decided to end it all again.

“I phoned the Samaritans, but they said they couldn't send anybody round as it was the weekend,” Esther said.

“I was paralysed with unhappiness and, when the woman from the Samaritans did come round, she virtually saved my life.

“She saw my situation as an outsider and saw how helpless I was.

“She asked if I wanted to go out, to the cinema perhaps, but I literally had no money.

“This woman showed me that I had a right to a life, so I started to make plans to leave.”

Esther, whose husband died in 2009, briefly moved to a bedsit.

And, after resuming teaching the method again, she was able to afford to buy a house.

“I thought it was the sensible

thing to do, but I had to be careful to tell my mother just how many students I had as she would have been so jealous,” Esther continued.

Five decades on and her classes are still going strong in the town of Hungerford.

Esther has also penned three keep-fit books and looks remarkable for her age. But there's no secret to her keeping her figure.

“I eat very healthily,” she laughed. “Lotte was terrible in that way — she loved her cakes and sweets. She had a very German palate and used to tell me that she missed the cafe culture life there. I almost never have treats.

“I was given a box of chocolates recently, but I am only eating one a day.”

With much written and talked about regarding obesity, especially among youngsters, Esther believes there is a problem in this country when it comes to exercise.

“It is still not as highly thought of as in America, for example, where the usual regimen is to go to the gym regularly,” she said.

“The wonderful thing about Lotte's exercises is that they strengthen the muscles so much that they support the joints.

“As you get older, your joints need supporting more because the muscles lose strength.”

Lotte died in 2003 after a battle with dementia — Ernest had died more than 20 years earlier.

Esther had moved her to Berkshire after Lotte was diagnosed and, as it became worse, her mother moved into a care home.

Despite Lotte's sometime terrible treatment of her daughter, Esther still felt it was her duty to take care of her mother when she became ill.

“It is an absolute oxymoron because she was my idol and was funny, witty and intelligent — but she could be cruel, cutting and humiliating,” explained grandmother-of-three Esther.

“I didn't know which mother I would be visiting sometimes, but I idolised the ‘good mother’. I thought she was wonderful.”

Judaism did not play a part in

Esther's upbringing, although she said she is “very proud of my heritage”.

She said: “Lotte's mother died when she was eight and then her father, who was a cantor, died at Auschwitz.

“She gave up on religion completely and her ‘marrying out’, to my father, did not make my grandfather happy, either.”

She went back to Germany with Lotte, to discover her roots, however.

“It was hard for her because she thought every German we met was a Nazi,” Esther recalled.

“I took my sons to Cologne a few years ago and that was lovely because they were able to see Germany through my eyes rather than my mother's.

“Everyone was friendly and warm.”

Lotte loved her cakes and sweets

Esther has penned another book, the aptly-titled *Dial M for Mother*, in which she discusses her “feelings, thoughts and philosophy”, which she hopes will be published after the new year.

And a film about her life may even be on the horizon.

“America was swept away by Lotte's technique and a student of mine has a friend who owns a PR firm in New York,” Esther said.

“I went out there and the woman who owns the firm said my story was too good to be true after she read my first book.

“She thought it was so good that she said she was going to try and have it in the goody bags which are given out at the Oscars, as she knows some producers.

“I am not taken in by it all — it is all La La Land to me.

“On the other hand, I am not sure who I would want to play me, I change my mind all the time.”

■ lotte-berk.com

BORN: Cologne, 1934.
FAMILY: Mother Lotte, father Ernest, children Michael and Jo, three grandchildren.
LIVES: Hungerford, Berkshire.
BOOKS: *Help Yourself to Health: Exercises That Really Work for Men and Women*, *The Reluctant Keep-Fitter*, *Reluctantly Fit*, *My Improper Mother and Me* and *Dial M for Mother*.