

# Erna Low

TO CLAIM that Erna Low invented the modern package tour would start one argument; to credit her with creating the chalet holiday would provoke another. The holiday-company pioneers of the 20th century were not conscious that they were making history, and few – unlike Thomas Cook, in an earlier era – kept an archive of their earliest days. As a result, the origins of the key innovations are the matter of dispute. Safest, then, to say what is uncontested: that Erna Low was a pivotal figure in the history of holidaymaking, particularly for British skiers.

A woman for whom the word "indomitable" might have been invented, Low liked an argument – provided she had a good chance of winning it. She would not admit defeat even when, eventually, convinced by her opponent's case. According to a long-term colleague – of whom there were several in Low's almost uninterupted 60-year career as a tour operator – the only sign that one had prevailed came with a gift from Low, usually a cake. Such force of character, combined with hard work and self-discipline, is what carried her through a business which, during the 1960s and 1970s, was as notable for its spectacular failures as its successes.

Her first customers, in 1932, responded to an advertisement she placed in the *Morning Post* (or perhaps the *New Statesman* – accounts vary) which read: "Viennese undergraduate taking party to Austria, fortnight £13." The cost of the holiday, in Solfero, included the return train fare, full-board accommodation, ski hire and instruction, plus German lessons. Always frugal and practical, Low later insisted that she only organised the trip (which had most of the hallmarks of today's package holidays) so that, as the tour guide, she could go and visit her

family without having to pay the cost of travel herself.

Low first came to Britain from Vienna in the early 1930s with a group of fellow students, an incautious trip to a village in Essex near Clacton-on-Sea which was interrupted when, by her own account, their host was arrested for attacking one of the students. Research for her doctorate – on the 19th-century poet Lord de la Motte – kept her in Britain for long periods before the Second World War, and in 1940 she became a British subject. (She also changed the spelling of her name, from Lowe to Low.)

She earned her living by continuing to run ski and summer trips, to Austria, France and Italy, and – during the Second World War, when she also worked for the BBC Monitoring Service – by organising UK "holiday parties", for which she would rent accommodation and provide meals for her guests.

Immediately after the war, the Erna Low Travel Service was established in London. Photographs of its first trip, to Ascona in Switzerland in 1946, appear in one of Low's scrapbooks, headbashed collages of snapshots, newspaper clippings and correspondence. One of them, captioned "Typical Low party", shows a group of studious-looking young men in sleeveless sweaters and open-neck shirts on a launch on Lake Maggiore, gathered happily around a gift in an overcoat.

By 1950, the company had grown sufficiently to have two dozen continental trips in its summer brochure, which described them as "holidays planned with imagination, not just stereotyped arrangements at well-known tourist centres". By 1957, the pocket-sized brochure already had 90 pages, and this was before the rapid expansion of the Erna Low Travel Service during the 1960s, with the advent of the "Show Train" to the Alps



Package-holiday pioneer: Low on the ski slopes in the 1950s

begin, Low picked up her handbag, took out the office keys and handed them to her co-director, Joanna Yellowless-Bound, who had joined her in 1982. "I'd like you to look after the company," she said, and walked out of the office, never to return. Although she did not marry, Low had an eye for good-looking men, as her scrapbooks reveal. When I interviewed her in autumn 1996, on one of the last occasions she left her home, our discussion of some vintage ski posters to be auctioned at Christie's was hampered by her failing memory. But she was distracted, too, by the young man *The Independent* had sent to photograph her. She found him very attractive. In the portrait which appeared in the paper, the intense, almost eager expression on her 87-year-old face suggests that she was looking beyond the camera rather than at it. From the pioneering work of Erna Low and others, the British

package holiday evolved to the point where its operational efficiencies made it a model for tour operators elsewhere in Europe. As a result, many of our big travel companies have now passed into foreign (usually German) ownership. But, while their influence has spread, most of the travel pioneers themselves are forgotten: even the name Thomas Cook was all but discarded by its owners, when the company's tour-operating arm was rebranded as jmc.

Erna Low's name, however, lives on – and flourishes. Low's last executive decision was a wise one: the turnover of the company which still bears her name has increased sixfold since she appointed Yellowless-Bound as her successor.

STEPHEN WOOD

Erna Louise (Erna Low), tour operator; born Vienna 28 July 1909; died London 12 February 2002.