

Her snow trains to the Alps helped launch the package tour

Erna Low

Erna Low, who has died aged 92, was a pioneer of package travel who helped, as much as anyone, to establish the popularity of the annual ski holiday. The weekly "snow trains" to the Alps, which she launched not long after the second world war, forged the first introductions to wintersports, then largely the preserve of a well-heeled few, for a wider, less privileged clientele.

She was born Erna Löwe in Vienna, threw the javelin for Austria, and came to London in 1930 to work on a doctoral thesis about the Victorian poet Lord De Tabley. It was mainly out of a need to pay for trips home that, in January 1932, she placed the following advertisement in the *Morning Post*: "Viennese undergradette taking party to Austria, fortnight, £15".

Five men took up the deal, travelling with Low and a chaperone to the resort of Sölden. There were no ski lifts, and one client, a Mr Sassoon, wrote afterwards: "Our days were spent climbing on skis and doing every variation of christiana and snow plough [ski techniques]. Our evenings were spent dancing in ski boots and playing 'Where are you, Moriarty?' and other games in which one spends a long time on the floor."

During the second world war, Low, who had left Vienna after the Anschluss of 1938, monitored German radio broadcasts for British intelligence at Evesham, exercising her ski legs on Breton Hill, Worcestershire, whenever snow fell. When peace returned, she organised house parties for people desperate to escape the gloom of rationing. It was, however, hardly hedonism. Though the house "will be warm, with lots of hot water and good food," ran the brochure, "I am not proposing to run these parties in the manner of a luxury hotel".

In 1948, Low began sending skiers to the mountains again, having formed Erna Low Travel Services two years earlier. Her brochure for that year trumpeted, "Winter sports are on the map again", and advertised two-week inclusive holidays to Mürren, in Switzerland, for 38 guineas. Britons going abroad were hampered

by severe currency restrictions, but enough of the price was paid in sterling to leave them £17 spending money.

Low often shared her snow trains with clients of Walter Ingham (obituary, July 7 2000), founder of the Ingham's tour operation, who had also begun sending ski parties to the Alps in the 1930s. It was his firm that was credited with adding dancing cars to the trains so that skiers could start their reveling during the 24-hour journey to the slopes. The trains carried 400 skiers via Calais or Dieppe to the Austrian Arlberg, and on to Zell am See.

In the mid-1950s, Low, herself a passionate skier, began organising chalet groups for skiers. Initially, customers did their own cooking and cleaning, but before long she employed maids to do domestic work. By then, the charter flight business was beginning to take off, and her firm also began offering holidays to Corsica, the Algarve and the Adriatic.

Staff at her offices in South Kensington regarded Low as a hard taskmistress, with a legendary zeal for saving money. Nevertheless, she won their lasting affection, and displayed fierce loyalty to them in return.

Having sold her original business in 1972, she bought back her trading name when the buyers went bust three years later. She sold up again in 1979 to become a consultant and, in 1981, became exclusive UK representative for the purpose-built French ski station of La Plagne. Though she underwent a heart bypass operation, she was later still to be found puffing her way around the resort.

Although she had long retired from the day-to-day running of the business, it continued to expand again, offering holidays in other French ski resorts, introducing holidays for disabled skiers and launching a new programme of spa packages.

Low never married.

Roger Bray

Erna Low, tour operator, born July 28 1909; died February 12 2002



Low... on the Alpine ski slopes in the early days of her pioneering tour business