

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. Safer, then, to say what is incontestable: that Erna Low was a pivotal figure in the history of holidaymaking, particularly for British skiers.

A woman for the 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 uninterrupted 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 £15.” The cost of the holiday, in Sölden, 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 inauspicious 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 Tabley – 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 Löwe 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, haphazard 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 girl 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 “Snow Train” to the Alps

and charter flights and the opening of a small travel-agency chain.

Low was motivated as much by her own passion for travel as by commercial reality: in the 1980s she pursued a programme which offered clients the opportunity to stay in Russian family homes with an enthusiasm which was never shared by the holiday-buying public. Nevertheless, her company’s success made it an attractive takeover target, and she sold it twice, in 1972 and 1979. But on neither occasion did it flourish under new ownership – even when it was run by a team which included a former chairman of Lloyd’s and an ex-Rothschild venture capitalist. So Low twice bought the company back, cheaply.

Still in the South Kensington premises Low had bought in 1947 as her home and offices (the artist Francis Bacon lived and worked across the mews, and was a good friend), the company was reinvented in 1981, ceasing to organise holidays and instead doing consultancy and marketing work for ski, golf and spa resorts. Cannily, Low took both a marketing fee and a commission on any accommodation bookings from her main ski clients – Les Arcs, La Plagne and Flaine in France – so that the company, by now Erna Low Consultants Ltd, was covering some of its overheads and profiting from its effective promotion of the resorts.

By the time the business restarted as a fully bonded ski operator for the 1996/97 season, Low was suffering from poor health. A keen sports-woman in her youth – she once won the Austrian javelin championship – she loved both skiing and tennis. Enthusiasm for the former drew her into the travel business; the pleasure she still took in watching the latter prompted her exit from the company. With television coverage of the 1995 Wimbledon tournament about to



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 Yellowlees-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 six-fold since she appointed Yellowlees-Bound as her successor.

STEPHEN WOOD

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