

ERNA LOW

Travel consultant and tour operator who led skiing tours before the war, and later circumvented the £50 travellers' allowance

The tour operator Erna Low once said, "People take a lot of time, but they are my hobby" — and her knack of taking a warm interest, which often developed into lasting friendship, was the huge strength that gave her a special place in the holiday business for more than 60 years.

Before the war she led skiing tours from Britain, introducing the well-to-do to a new sport and the beauty of the Alps. Later, when currency restrictions precluded lavish foreign travel, she devised and arranged house party holidays in Britain. But she also found a way to circumvent the rules, and in the process helped to give us the package holiday as we know it today.

There were exchange controls of various kinds in Britain from the end of the 1930s until 1979, when they were abolished by the incoming Thatcher Government to gasps of amazement. As part of the package during the late 1960s and the 1970s, when sterling was especially beleaguered, travellers were permitted to take no more than £50 out of the country. With details of the currency they took out being entered in their passports, the options for holidaymakers were limited. But as far back as 1948 Low had begun to offer all-inclusive packages (a fortnight in Murren, staying in a first-class hotel, was 38 guineas). The key was payment in advance, so that the hoteliers could be paid by the company for a block booking, rather than by the individual travellers out of their allowances.

Erna Low remained active in the travel business in her eighties, representing new and exclusive resorts, and encouraging clients to experiment with new forms of holiday.

Born and educated in Vienna, Erna Low attributed her ability to build up businesses from nothing to her father, who arrived from Czechoslovakia penniless and created a thriving postal education school. From the age of eight, wearing her brother's discarded sports clothes, she was a passionate skier. She went on to study languages and take a physical education course at Vienna University, where she became Austrian javelin champion.

She was first brought to England by her doctoral thesis on the minor Victorian poet Lord De Tabley — a subject chosen by a jealous student. With characteristic determination Low traced De Tabley's grandchildren, and found herself invited



Even Erna Low's brochures were designed with the personal touch

to stay at the family's stately home near Knutsford. Carrying a rucksack and having stayed at hostels for unemployed maids en route, she arrived after more than an hour's walk from Knutsford station and reached the top of the long estate drive. The De Tabley family were amazed: "No one has ever walked up the drive before," she was told.

When she left, her meagre student's savings did not go far in tips for the many servants, and she was embarrassed to be able to do no more than shake hands with the butler.

While still a student, she came to

know many different sorts of people in Britain, and made many friendships. There were writers and printers, for instance, whom she got to know as translator of pamphlets for a daughter of the Pankhurst family. She gave also German lessons from a top floor flat in Bloomsbury, and in order to finance trips to Vienna to see her sick mother, she took students to ski in Austria.

In 1932 she placed an advertisement in *The Morning Post* reading simply "Viennese undergraduate taking party to Austria, fortnight £15". That first Christmas skiing party consisted of five young men



and a female chaperone, and set the pattern for a flourishing business. When impending war made it impossible to go to Austria, she took her parties to Switzerland instead; her ten-day stay — with fares, couchettes, full board, accommodation, ski hire and instruction — cost £17 10s.

In 1941 she joined the BBC monitoring service, recording and translating German stations. She hated it, and at the end of the war in Europe she took a job with Army Education, touring the "searchlight" military stations to lecture on diverse subjects from electoral reform to the re-education of the German population.

These lecture tours gave her a greater knowledge of England than many natives, and in order to raise money for a new car, she organised her first English house parties, simple in style and with the guests doing their own cooking. "Most of my friends came from those times," she later reflected. Britain had few hotels then, but Low listed the ones she found on her travels, so taking the first serious steps towards establishing her agency, Enjoy Britain.

Every potential house party customer was personally interviewed so that congenial groups could be put together. Her success stemmed from the personal care and interest she took in all her clients. When foreign travel was again possible, she recommenced the skiing parties, including trips for school groups. One housemistress told her to expect "a girl with a special mother" — but when Princess Anne arrived late in Davos, all the

best beds had already been taken by the other girls, leaving only camp-beds.

In the late 1970s Low discovered several new secluded sunshine spots, including Tossa in Spain, Sesimbra south of Lisbon, and Corsica. She sold the Erna Low Travel Service in 1972, when it was running tours to 59 resorts and had 60 staff and five travel shops. The sale was not a success, however, and three years later she made news when she bought back her own name.

She then built it up once again, very quickly, and sold out a second time in 1979. Finally she set herself up as a travel consultant, beginning yet again from scratch. She specialised in representation of ski and golf resorts, and in particular of spas. She was especially fond of finding spas in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and even some in Russia.

In the early 1990s she also found she had a flair for feasibility studies, one of which, about Strathpeffer, gained her membership of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. She was also a member of the British Institute of Management and the Institute of Travel and Tourism. She was vice-president of the Kensington Chamber of Commerce and also of the Women of the Year Association. When she was 83 she won a Women Mean Business award, and spent the £500 prize on clothes in Switzerland. But she had never particularly wanted to be a business tycoon, she just enjoyed what she did. She attributed the arthritis in her hands to continuing to write out the text of her brochures by hand.

Even in her eighties she worked a full office day, travelled a lot, and worked as British representative for several French resorts. Among the recent projects she worked on with her partner Joanna Yellowlees-Bound were self-catering in France and ski programmes for the disabled. Her work earned her awards from Austria and France and the Order of Merit from Italy.

After the outbreak of war she had helped one of her pupils to run a hospital for evacuated children at Dunwich, showing an interest in the young that endured through her years in the 1970s as a governor of Avondale Park School in Kensington. Although she was never to marry, she had many godchildren, including the actress Emily Lloyd.

Erna Low, tour operator, was born on July 7, 1909. She died on February 12, 2002, aged 92.