

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **PROFESSOR PHILIP O’KANE**, Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering, University College Cork on 8 June 2012, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **ISOLDE LIEBHERR**

A Sheansailéir agus a mhuintir uilig na hOllscoile,

I greet you in the dialect of your Alpine Land *Grüezi wohl!*

Fruitful exchanges between Ireland on the edge of Europe and the German-speaking world of the Rhein and Danube have been intermittent, but may be traced back more than a thousand years.

I recall the twelfth-century Arthurian legend of the Cornish Knight, Tristan, and the Irish Princess, Isolde, whose magical powers Richard Wagner set to music in his drama *Tristan und Isolde*. In act 1 scene 5 Tristan sings "*Wohl kenn ich Irlands Königin und ihrer Künste Wunderkraft.*" (Well I know Ireland's Queen (Isolde) and the magical power of her Arts).

I recall Irish pilgrim monks of the sixth and seventh centuries travelling to Rome along the high water mark of the fallen Roman Empire, down the Rhein and Danube, through your homeland of Oberschwaben – the Upper Swabian Plateau – in the Bundesland of Baden-Württemberg in the southwest corner of Germany. Lake Constance on the Rhine marks the southern border of Swabia, and beyond lie the High Alps of Switzerland, visible on clear days.

On their way to Rome these monks founded monasteries, such as Sankt Gallen between the Swiss Alps of Appenzell and Lake Constance. I recall German scholars, such as Kuno Mayer, once a freeman of the City of Cork, and Ludwig Bieler, who mined such libraries for the earliest Irish texts. Today Sankt Gallen is famous for both its UNESCO-World-Heritage Library and its Business School.

And I recall the Dublin Commissioner of Public Works, William Thomas Mulvaney, who, ten years after our *Gorta Mór* or Great Famine of 1845-52, settled with his family in the Ruhr and founded the Hibernia, Shamrock and Erin coal-mining companies, drawing capital from the Malcomsons of Portlaoigh in Co Waterford. These companies were the precursors of the VEBA Group, once one of the largest conglomerates in Germany. These mines are remembered in street names in the towns of Castrop-Rauxel, Herne, Waltrop, and Gelsenkirchen.

Today, we honour a very successful business woman, whose global company, Liebherr, has had a manufacturing plant and several hotels in Killarney for more than 50 years. Her father has already been honoured with a Killarney road named in his memory.

Frau Isolde Liebherr's father, Hans, founded the Liebherr company in 1949 in a small wooden bungalow in the village of *Kirchdorf an der Iller*. The bungalow was initially both family home and workshop. His preparation for his life's task was simple, direct and very dangerous.

Having attended the local Volksschule and served his time as an apprentice craftsman, he passed his examination as a Master Builder, or Baumeister, in the city of Ulm in 1938 aged 23. He took over his parents' modest construction business in Kirchdorf, but interrupted by war, he spent the following seven years in the *Ulmer Engineering-Battalion 101* on the Eastern Front.

He survived the war, returned to Kirchdorf and married Fräulein Maria Göppel, who blessed him with five children, the second youngest of whom is Frau Isolde. He witnessed every day the backbreaking work - Knochenarbeit he called it - of rebuilding apartment and office blocks by hand, frequently female hands, since so many young men did not return from the war. The mechanization of building and construction became his life-long goal and passion, which three of his children have inherited.

The first product designed and built by the Liebherr company was an easily assembled and disassembled rotating tower crane mounted on rails, the *Fahrbaren Turmdrehkran*. The first of its kind, it was granted the patent number TR10 by the Federal Patent Office on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1949. Painted yellow for visibility and easily transportable, the tower cranes sold like hot cakes. Following this success Liebherr developed the L300, the first mobile hydraulic excavator on the European continent.

Both the bungalow and the village were soon outgrown; Liebherr needed workers and facilities larger than those a village could provide. The new location was a nearby town on the next tributary of the Danube to the east, *Biberach an der Riß*. The company of one hundred employees moved from Kirchdorf to Biberach in 1954.

The Liebherr company rode the growth wave of the economic miracle, the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the Adenauer (1949-1963) and Erhard (1957-1963-1966) years, becoming a "Hidden Champion" of the SME sector, the *Mittlestand*, of the German economy. In recognition of his creativity and business acumen Hans Liebherr, Master Builder, was awarded an honorary doctorate by the engineering school of the Technische Hochschule Aachen in 1964. Many other awards followed.

In their niche markets "Hidden Champions"<sup>1</sup> are number one on their continent, in the top three in the world, have an annual turnover of less than 3 billion euro (2006), and are almost never in the public eye. There are roughly 2,000 "Hidden Champions" in the world, with two thirds located in the German-speaking lands. They are frequently family-owned with no glass ceilings preventing female family members from exercising their special gifts for management, nurturing company morale on the values of the women of Swabia:

"reliability, diligence, commitment to the task, loyalty", and "pride in having one's feet on the ground".

The quotation<sup>2</sup> is from an address by Frau Liebherr. Bundes-chancellor Frau Merkel often speaks of the exemplary Swabian Hausfrau.<sup>3</sup>

While Liebherr remains a world champion in its portfolio of products, it has ceased to be 'hidden' not least because of the physical size of the yellow cranes it makes - Killarney Cathedral would fit underneath one - but also because of the size of its present annual turnover (8.4 billion euro), number of daughter companies (120) and employees (35,100) across the world.<sup>4</sup> It is now a 'Big Champion'.

Liebherr first entered markets in the English-speaking world in 1958 with the building of the Killarney factory and three hotels. For many years Liebherr-Killarney built the largest tower cranes in the world and exported them through the nearby port of Fenit. From 1967 the factory specialized within the Liebherr Group in the design, manufacture, delivery, and servicing of rail-mounted quayside container cranes and container stacking cranes for the ports, railway and trucking yards of the world.

Killarney also supplies marketing, training, localization, servicing, and spare parts. The Hotels employ 200 people, the factory more than 600, some of whom have started spin-off companies in the Killarney region. Approximately 350 are highly skilled fitters, welders and electricians, and more than 60 are graduates, the majority in engineering. Liebherr-Killarney has a full order book and has begun an ambitious expansion of its manufacturing facilities. In the context of the Irish economy this Killarney Company is a "Hidden Champion".

Following her Masters Degree in Economics (Diplom Kaufmann) from the top German business school at the University of Mannheim, Frau Isolde Liebherr began her commercial apprenticeship in the Liebherr-Killarney hotels and gained further business experience in the many daughter companies within the Group. On the death of her father in 1993 she took over the running of the Group with her brother Dipl. Ing. Willi Liebherr, whose Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering from the Swiss

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Simon "HIDDEN CHAMPIONS DES 21. JAHRHUNDERTS - die Erfolgsstrategien unbekannter Weltmarktführer" (Hidden Champions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century - the successful strategies of the unknown leaders on world markets) Campus Verlag, Frankfurt & New York. 2007. Pp 452.

<sup>2</sup> FÜNfte FESTWoche DES ALPENRAUMES 5. Oktober bis 14. Oktober 2001 MEMORANDUM by Dipl. Kfm. Frau Isolde Liebherr on being made Botschafterin der Friedensglocke des Alpenraumes 2001. <http://www.telfs.com/gemeinde/festwoche/>

<sup>3</sup> The male political kommentariat in Germany is not amused.

<sup>4</sup> The Liebherr Group's holding company is Liebherr-International AG in Bulle, Switzerland. [Annual Report 2010 - Liebherr](http://www.liebherr.com/.../131769.wfw?...~%2FCMS%2Fdownl...) [www.liebherr.com/.../131769.wfw?...~%2FCMS%2Fdownl...](http://www.liebherr.com/.../131769.wfw?...~%2FCMS%2Fdownl...) - Germany

Federal Technical University (ETH) Zurich is a perfect complement to Frau Isolde's business specialisation.

In the twenty years since 1993, the two Liebherr siblings have trebled the size of the group. Furthermore, two daughters of Frau Isolde, and a son and daughter of Herr Willi have started up the ladder of the Group. When the handover comes, a third generation of women may continue to steer the Group on the global stage. What an achievement!

When not at work the Liebherrs have taken a keen interest in sport, providing playing pitches and sports halls for their workforce and local communities. Frau Isolde is a keen supporter of show jumping. Her niece, daughter of Hans (Jnr) represented Switzerland in the last Olympics in Beijing and remains a member of the Swiss team. Local charities also receive sustained support, especially those working with the handicapped, such as the "Kerry Parents and Friends Association - *Chun cabhrú le daoine eile é chun cabhrú leat*".

I have searched for a poetic image that might describe the engagement of the peoples of Germany and Ireland in the Liebherr Company, who are so different in temperament and culture. I offer this quotation from the recent memoir of Hugo Hamilton entitled *The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood*. Hugo is the son of a German mother from Kempen in Nordrhein-Westfalen and an Irish-speaking father, a graduate in electrical engineering from this University:

"So my brother and I ran out wearing lederhosen and Aran sweaters, smelling of rough wool and new leather, Irish on top and German below. We were indestructible. We could slide down granite rocks. We could fall on nails and sit on glass. Nothing could sting us now and we ran down the lane faster than ever before, brushing past nettles as high as our shoulders."<sup>5</sup>

Frau Isolde Liebherr I salute your achievements, those of your family in the Alpine Lands, and those of your companies throughout the world. On this auspicious day I wish you and your family long life and happiness. *Go mba fada buan sibh!*

*Praehonorabilis cancellarie, totaque universitas: Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.*

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<sup>5</sup> "Also liefen mein Bruder und ich mit Lederhosen und Aran-Pullovern nach draussen. Wir rochen nach grober Wolle und neuem Leder und waren oben irisch und unten deutsch. Wir waren unverwundlich. Wir konnten Granitenfels hinunterrutschen. Wir konnten auf Nägel fallen und auf Dornen sitzen. Nichts konnte uns pieksen, und wir liefen schneller die Gasse hinunter als je zuvor und streiften dabei schulterhohe Brennesseln." From the German edition: *Gescheckte Menschen* by Hugo Hamilton (Autor), Henning Ahrens (Übersetzer).

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