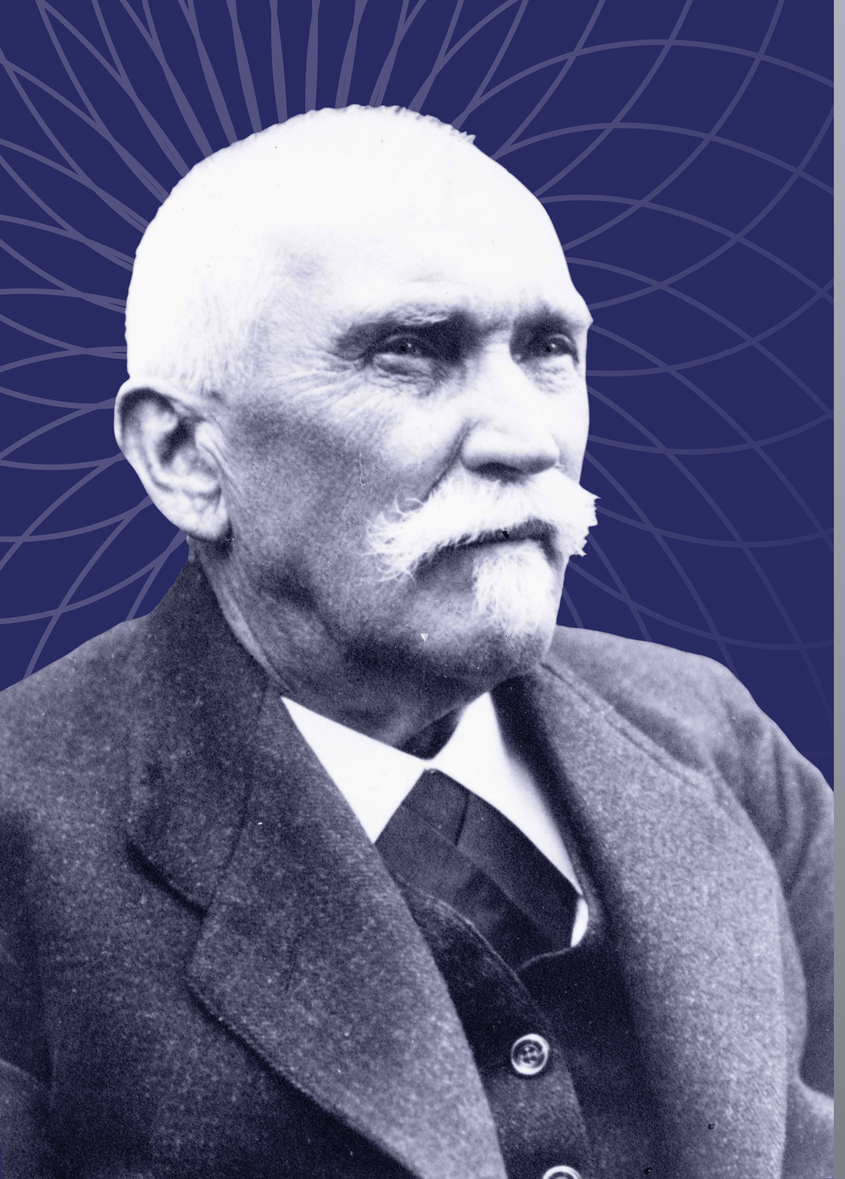


Anfänge

From Clay to Company

‘The master mould in our company… is the most important thing. It’s our asset’. ***Sabina Saar.***

The beginnings of the Saar family business date to 1907, when their forebear, Anton Müller, a talented artist and craftsman, established the Müller-Volkstedt porcelain factory, in the renowned porcelain making town of Rudolstadt-Volkstedt, some 200kms from Dresden in Thuringia, East Germany. To this day, the Irish Dresden logo contains the initials MV and the Royal Crown warrant as a nod to the company’s origins.



‘Vienna Waltz’ Irish Dresden figurine made from an original 1907 mould. © Irish Dresden

Anton Müller, the Saars forebear and founder of Müller-Volkstedt porcelain factory, Thüringen, Germany, c. 1910-20. © Family collection.

The company’s operations continued successfully until 1945, when the town of Volkstedt was bombed during WWII. The factory was razed, but the master moulds, remarkably, survived in the cellars, and were salvaged by Müller’s great-niece Johanna Saar and her husband Oskar, who went on to rebuild and reopen the factory.

The rebirth was short lived, however, as the Russian occupation in 1950 proved an even greater challenge to the survival of the business. Faced with an increasingly untenable situation, the Saars took the daring decision to flee East Germany.

In the dead of the night, Johanna Saar filled the family car with the most valuable original master moulds, and somehow managed to successfully navigate a minefield to cross the border into West Germany, where the business was once again reestablished.

The family did not know it then, but their travels were far from over.



The evolution of the Irish Dresden trademark since 1907. © Irish Dresden.



The Müller-Volkstedt porcelain factory, in Rudolstadt-Volkstedt, Thüringen, Germany, c. 1935. © Family Collection.

From the GDR to Dromcolliher

'My mother and father, they went to see a movie. And this movie was filmed in Ireland. And my father thought, God, that country is fantastic. Everything is green. It had lovely rivers. He said to his wife, Johanna, 'we'll just go and have a look at the country, and we see what we like' ... And my father, of course, fell in love with Ireland'. *Sabina Saar.*

From the 1960s, the Irish government began actively seeking foreign direct investment from multinational corporations, particularly in the manufacturing sector.

In 1960, at the Hannover Trade Fair, the Saars met Diarmuid O'Riordan, the founder of Southern Chemicals in Askeaton, and representative of Dromcolliher Muintir na Tíre, an organisation who were actively seeking a suitable industry for Dromcolliher. Much work had already been undertaken, and under the direction of the local physician in Dromcolliher, Dr T. F. McNamara, some £5,000 had been raised to invest in a factory for the town, through the sale of some 60 shares.

Attracted by the prospects and adventure of Ireland, the Saar family relocated to Co. Limerick in 1962. Initially called Porcelain Products, the company's name was later changed to better reflect its distinct Irish-Germanic origins and Irish Dresden was born.

The American agent at the time felt that this was a better strategy to sell into the US market and he was proved right!

The company commenced life with fifteen employees, mostly local teenagers.

Tragically, in 1968, after only six years in Ireland, Oskar Saar died unexpectedly leaving Johanna presiding over both the family and the business. As Johanna later recalled 'my accountant advised me to go home ... he said you'll never make it'.

But not one to be deterred, Johanna resolutely chose to stay the course.



▸ *Porcelain figurine from a Porcelain Products pricelist dated 1966. © Family Collection.*



▲ *Oskar Saar and John Galvin pictured outside the partially completed Irish Dresden factory in Dromcolliher, Co. Limerick, 1962. © Family Collection.*



▲ *Employees pictured outside the Irish Dresden factory in Dromcolliher, Co. Limerick, c. 1969. © Family Collection.*



▲ *The Irish Dresden factory under construction in Dromcolliher, Co. Limerick, 1962. © Family Collection.*

Johanna Saar *A Businesswoman Breaking the Mould*

'Thankfully the role of women in business has changed but I believe that my grandmother was a trailblazer. She did not take 'no' for an answer. She was determined to get through whatever difficulties or challenges she faced'. ***Kristian Schnittger-Saar.***

Aided by grants from Shannon Development, and with Johanna at the helm, Irish Dresden continued to grow and expand. By 1970, satisfied, that the employees had achieved the requisite competence to manufacture to the highest standards, Johanna set her eyes on the export market. By the mid-1980s, 80 per cent of Irish Dresden's wares were being exported, with some 50 per cent going to America. Johanna later broke into the Japanese market, where the firm continues to have much success. An early pioneer of Irish made products, Johanna was flying the flag for Made in Ireland, long before it ever became a movement.

Aided by her four daughters, at various times during the years, Sabina, Cornelia, Angelika and Susanna, Johanna presided over an extraordinary matriarchy, a successful firm ran 100% by women, staffed 90% by women.



▲ *Johanna Saar and daughters, Susanna, Angelika and Sabina at the Business Woman of the Year Awards 1987. © Family Collection.*



In recognition of her entrepreneurial skills, Johanna was awarded the prestigious Veuve Clicquot Businesswoman of the Year Award in 1987, presented to her by the late Peter Sutherland, former Irish Attorney General, businessman and EU Commissioner for Competition.

◀ *Johanna Saar presenting a piece of Irish Dresden titled 'Reading the Family Bible' to First Lady Nancy Reagan on the occasion of 'Invest in America', May 1987. © Family Collection.*

Perhaps the greatest accolade, which can be paid to Johanna and her family, is the fact that Irish Dresden is now renowned worldwide, and Presidents John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton and First Lady Nancy Reagan have all been presented with Irish Dresden as well as many stars including Hollywood actress, Maureen O'Hara, 1993 Eurovision winner, Niamh Kavanagh and dignitaries including Princess Anne and Pope John Paul II.

Resilience & Rebirth

‘I was about to give up. But Kristian said no we can’t. And he’s right. My parents went through so much … They had all sorts of upheaval … But again, we got through that’.
Sabina Saar.

Irish Dresden was among a cohort of Irish manufactories, including Waterford Crystal to be adversely affected by the post 2008 Irish economic downturn. By 2009 matters had come to a head and the decision was made to close the company and let go all 35 employees.

But as with so many of the Saars endeavours – this was not the end. Determined to keep her family’s legacy alive, Sabina Saar bought the company back from the liquidators in 2012.

In 2023, Sabina’s nephew Kristian Schnittger-Saar joined the business and today both look forward to the next chapter of Irish Dresden with plans for an interpretation centre at their Dromcolliher factory. Contacts are also being made to make Irish Dresden part of the European porcelain tour. The Saars have held meetings in Germany and hope to have Irish Dresden added as part of a European ‘Porzellanstrasse’ (porcelain route) so that this wonderful history can be shared with future generations.

A testament to the longstanding loyalties to the company, two of their current employees, Nick Roche and Nora Gilmore, have been with the business since the 1960s and 70s respectively. And Irish Dresden has become part of the very fabric of Dromcolliher.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke said that ‘creating something is … an act of profound remembrance’ and one cannot help but feel that this is true of the Saars legacy. With a new generation at the helm, and the Saar spirit of determination as strong as ever - another new beginning is in sight. As eloquently put by longstanding employee, Nick Roche ‘Kristian has taken it on board, and he has a dream. It takes a young person to do it’.



‘Grandmother’s Birthday’ Irish Dresden porcelain figurine made from an original 1907 mould. © Irish Dresden.



‘Kittiwake’ Irish Dresden porcelain figurine designed by Uwe Netzsch. © Irish Dresden.



Managing director of Irish Dresden, Sabina Saar and Kristian Schnittger-Saar pictured visiting Mr Takarada, owner of a Dresden store in Yokohama, Japan. © Family Collection

‘Oisin’ Irish Dresden porcelain figure designed by Danny Osborne. Danny resided in the Arctic Circle for a period with his wife and two young children. This resulted in the beautiful porcelain figurines of his children Orla and Oisin. © Irish Dresden.