

From the Editor

A European working time directive

Then

We first met as young doctors in training at the same hospital in London. He was Polish and completed his medical training in Warsaw. Through discussions we discovered a mutual interest in the music of Gustav Mahler.

Otto Klemperer was conducting Mahler's Ninth Symphony at the Royal Festival Hall. Klemperer, who had known the composer, was born into a Jewish family in Poland but in the 1930s was forced to flee to the USA. Only two of the most expensive seats were left in the stalls. My Polish friend and I could not afford them but bought them anyway. It proved a memorable evening. 'I believe that this, [Mahler's] last completed symphony, is also his greatest work', the conductor wrote in the programme. Well into his 80s and paralysed down one side, Klemperer shuffled with assistance onto the stage and was manoeuvred into his seat. He seemed to conduct the New Philharmonia Orchestra with just the fingers of one hand and yet the performance still lives on in the memory in a way that no other has quite achieved.

Shortly after the concert our medical training paths diverged but we continued to keep in touch each Christmas.

Now

We recently met in Warsaw after an interval of nearly 40 years and like old friends picked up where we had left off. Over supper we recalled that magnificent concert which sparked memories of my friend's own extraordinary childhood which he related for the first time. During the second world war at the age of 14 he was arrested and forced to

work in a factory. He was woken at 4.30 am each morning and was at work an hour later for a 12-hour day, seven days a week. Despite this arduous schedule, he made his way to a school hidden from the authorities after work where he spent four hours each evening studying. This pattern continued for several years until the end of the war. He was particularly proud, and with good cause, that he achieved sufficiently high grades in the university entrance examinations to proceed with his undergraduate medical career as if nothing untoward had happened. It was humbling that he regarded himself as lucky – many of his friends were taken away and never seen again.

We moved onto a variety of different topics. Later that evening we discussed the current challenges for doctors in training in Poland. As a member of the EU one of the most pressing issues was the legal requirement to introduce a maximum 56-hour working week which must be further reduced to 48 hours by 2009. With a wry smile he said that this was not the first European working time directive that he had encountered.

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