Section II SPORT—FINANCE

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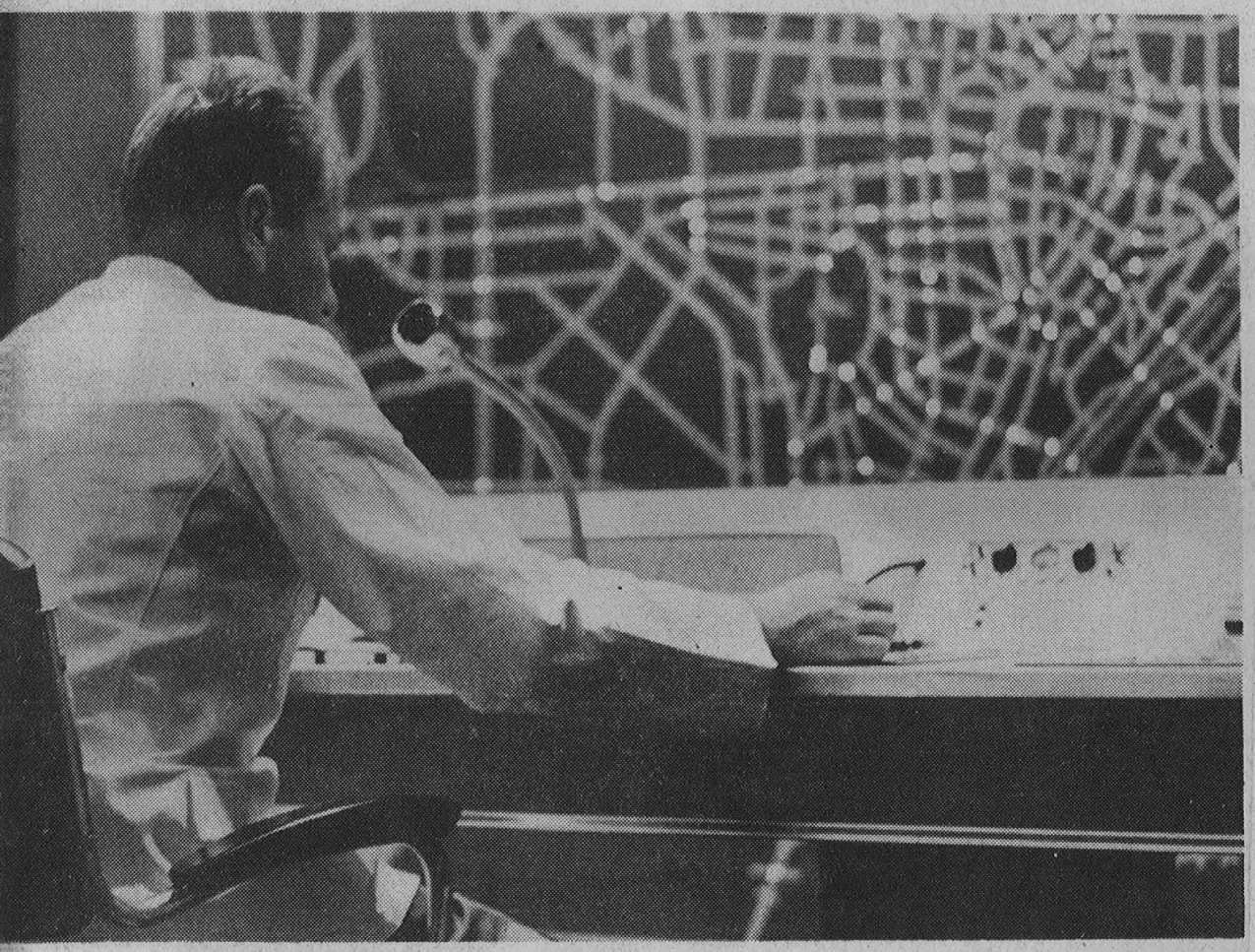


—Staff Photos by Peter Desbarats

Police Insp. Joseph Kistler of Munich's traffic squad surveys a board showing the operation of all the city's traffic lights. The control console is part of an elaborate system which employs closed-circuit television to aid in the supervision of traffic control in the city's bustling downtown streets.

Efficient Control in Cities

Germany Battles Its Traffic

BY PETER DESBARATS
(Fourth of a Series)

Previous articles in this series have dealt with such topics as co-existence, the Common Market and German reunification. Now the time has come to discuss a real problem — traffic.

The German people often have exhibited a penchant for tackling impossible assignments. In this case, they have achieved limited victory over an adversary that has beaten many North American experts — not to mention pedestrians — into the dust. Traffic control in many of West Germany's larger cities is typically efficient and authoritative.

For instance . . .

Several weeks ago, as the afternoon rush hour began in Munich, I was sitting in a darkened section of the traffic operation room at local police headquarters. With me was a member of Munich's special traffic squad. He was sitting in front of a large console covered with buttons and levers, surveying 17 television screens. Each screen showed traffic moving through a major intersection in downtown Munich.

Suddenly the operator stiffened. He leaned forward and peered at one of the screens.

Trouble Sensed

To the untrained eye, the intersection appeared normal. But the operator had sensed trouble. His hand reached instinctively for one of the levers on the console.

More than a mile away, atop a 30-foot metal pole in the centre of the intersection, protected by a steel umbrella, a television camera began to rotate. It turned almost a full circle before coming to a stop. There was another whirr of miniature electrical motors as the camera's telephoto lens adjusted itself.

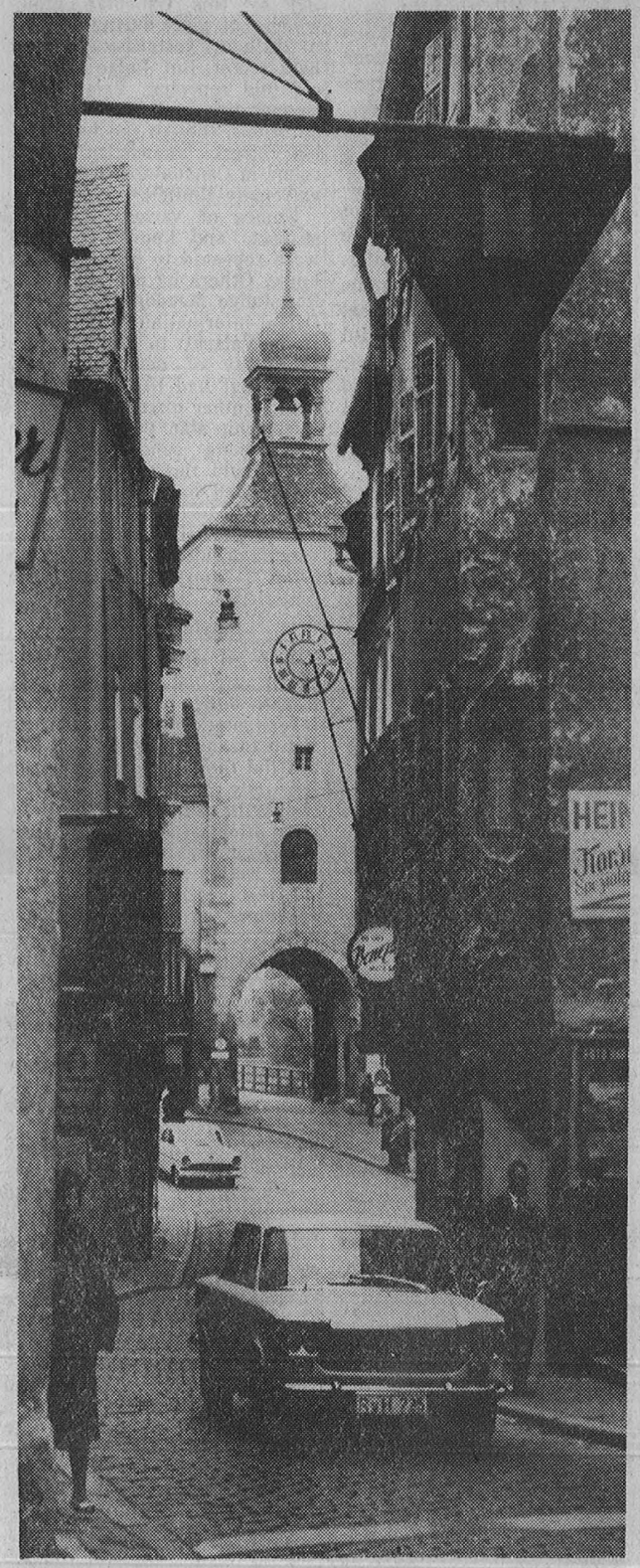
In the operation room, the man before the console watched the screen as the camera scanned every street leading into the intersection. He stopped its rotation when the screen showed an avenue clogged with vehicles. The remote-control lens enabled him to "zoom in" on the street and spot the trouble. A car was parked illegally in a curb lane reserved for rush-hour traffic.

The operator reached for a microphone. In a split-second he was talking with the driver of a special traffic squad patrol car in the area. Almost before he stopped talking, the television screen showed the patrol car approaching the parked trouble-maker. An officer leaped out of the car, looked vainly for the driver of the parked car and then returned to his own vehicle to radio for a tow truck.

Within a few minutes we saw the culprit being towed away to the police compound. It would have been interesting to stick around for the driver's appearance but the operator had more important things to worry about. Zooming back to the main intersection, he pressed a button controlling traffic lights. The automatic sequence of the lights at the intersection was interrupted to give the clogged street a long green.

All in all, it had taken the operator no longer than 10 minutes to spot the traffic jam, identify the trouble and solve the problem.

To date, some four or five German cities have adopted the Big-Brother-is-watching-you technique of traffic control. All are in West Germany. On the other side of the Wall, communist authorities have eliminated traffic congestion at the source. There were only about 300,000 motor vehicles in the Soviet zone in 1960 compared with almost 8,000,000 in the Federal Republic. The West German total represented an eight-fold increase since 1948.



Narrow streets and an ever-increasing number of new cars create a major traffic problem in Munich.

The number of motor vehicles in the Federal Republic now averages more than 75 per square mile compared with about 23 vehicles per square mile in the United States.

Statistics come alive when you stand on a downtown street corner in any large German city.

Abundance of Cars

The pavement is obscured by a constant flow of new Mercedes, Volkswagens, DKWs and an increasing number of imported French, Italian and British cars. Although some cities still maintain roadside tracks for bicycles on certain suburban routes, Germany has left the bicycle era far behind. Even motorcycles are becoming comparatively rare. The great Ford dream has gripped western Europe with a vengeance.

Munich was saddled with more than its share of traffic problems in the past decade. Not as heavily damaged during the war as some of the other German cities, its old street pattern remained intact to a great extent. Many of the central intersections were ill-designed to handle modern traffic and local politicians were reluctant to widen streets by carving away chunks of historic and architecturally interesting buildings.

But something had to be done. Munich today is a city of somewhat more than 1,000,000 people with a motor vehicle "population of 260,000 vehicles. This gives it about the same vehicle density as Greater Montreal, which has a population of 2,000,000 and about 500,000 motor vehicles.

Five years ago, Munich started to experiment with traffic control by television. The system was tied in with a highly synchronized network of traffic lights which not only keep traffic moving in "streams" but can be switched in seconds to provide "green paths" through the city for emergency vehicles.

The operator in the television room at police headquarters can control traffic either through interference with lights or by contacting the traffic squad's 18 radio cars and seven radio-equipped motorcycles. The system reduces the number of men required for point duty at intersections but economy is not its main purpose.

"It's our ultimate weapon in old sections of the city where new construction is impossible," said Insp. Joseph Kistler, of the Munich traffic squad.

"So far, we haven't been able to think of anything better."

Tomorrow: Pride and Prejudice.