EIGHTY EVENTFUL YEARS:
J. W. BRUEGEL
LOOKS BACK AND AHEAD

On a pleasant early June day Johann Wolfgang Bruegel sits in his favorite chair in the living room of his six-room house in the Hampstead Garden Suburb district of London. Every corner is filled with books and papers; the garage overflows with them; the accumulation of a lifetime of journalism, politics, scholarship. On the morrow he and his wife Josephine, a physician ("officially retired but unofficially still working, to a lesser degree"), will depart for a vacation in southern France. On this day he is content to review for a visitor’s benefit the course of his eventful career.

In one month—on July 3, 1985, to be exact—he will be eighty years old. This grand age seals his status as a senior observer-participant in some of the major events in twentieth-century European history, and especially of those in his native country, Czechoslovakia. Letters of congratulation are arriving daily. The University of Klagenfurt has invited him to prepare the chapter on the Bohemian Lands in a forthcoming volume on “Austro-Marxism and Nationality.” The German Historical Institute in London is arranging an evening in his honor. Friends are telephoning. Amidst the excitement Dr. Bruegel displays an outward nonchalance. He affably consents to sketch the main contours in his education and experience in France, Czechoslovakia, and Great Britain upon my assurance that such details will interest persons who follow European affairs and scholars who know of his many works.

The story begins in 1905 with Dr. Bruegel’s birth in the old Habsburg empire, in Hustopeče (Auspitz), a town of about 3,500 south of Brno (Brünn) in a fertile region of Moravia. His father, the town judge, met and married his mother there. The parents of former Czechoslovak president T. G. Masaryk are buried in Hustopeče, and Masaryk himself was born in a city thirty kilometers to the east. When Dr. Bruegel (henceforth B.) was three his father was transferred to Brno, a major industrial center where the child grew up and matured. B’s father died when he was eight (his mother died in 1943 at Terezín [Theresienstadt]).

In Brno young B. attended a German elementary school and, from 1915 to 1923, the Deutsches Staatsgymnasium, a famous secondary school of Habsburg Austria and Czechoslovakia. As a student he was drawn to Social
Democracy. In 1924 he joined the German Social Democratic Party of Czechoslovakia and worked for it "as a poorly paid but enthusiastic sub-editor of the party's daily, Volksfreund." He studied law meanwhile at the German University in Prague. Regular attendance at lectures was not required of law students, so he was able to continue his work in Brno, making an appearance in Prague mainly for occasional examinations.

In 1928 B. was awarded his degree as Doctor of Laws (JUDr.) and in January 1929 began his civil service career in the Law Court in Brno. The future held the probability that he would follow his father's profession of judge. Even as he worked at the law, journalism and public service beckoned. He reported on local happenings for Volksfreund, wrote book reviews for other Social Democratic newspapers, and often spoke over Czechoslovak radio in a program aimed at German workers.

Turning to his subsequent entry into the civil service on a national level, B. recalls: "At the end of 1929 the German SDs joined the governing coalition for the first time. The SD leader, Dr. Ludwig Czech, became Minister of Social Welfare. He had been my father's friend and knew our family." Dr. Czech needed a trustworthy private secretary to handle the voluminous German-language correspondence of the Ministry. There were only two German officials in the whole Ministry and neither one was interested in or available for the job. So B. was "borrowed" from the Ministry of Justice and later formally attached to the Ministry of Social Welfare.

This was in February 1930. B. was not yet twenty-five. He says: "I believe, looking back, that I must have made many silly mistakes, at least in the first years. But there simply was no choice. I was the only Czechoslovak official with legal training—a prerequisite for an executive official—who belonged to the German Social Democratic Party."

For eight years B. served in the demanding job of Dr. Czech's secretary. In February 1934, when Dr. Czech became Minister of Public Works, B. went with him, and again in June 1935, when his chief was named Minister of Public Health and Physical Education. (Such shifting of cabinet posts was typical under the Czechoslovak parliamentary system based on proportional representation.) According to B.: "Those eight years of strenuous work gave me a rare insight into the functioning of the state apparatus and helped me considerably when writing books later about the First Republic, including my biography of Dr. Czech."

In 1938 Dr. Bruegel's status changed as did that of everyone else as Czechoslovakia felt growing pressure from Nazi Germany. The position of Germans of democratic persuasion became precarious. He explains: "London and Paris forced Prague to negotiate with the Henlein movement, which abandoned its previous denial of any connection with Hitler for an open declaration of adherence to Nazism. The democratic and 'activist' German parties in the governing coalition began to withdraw. Thus the experiment at German