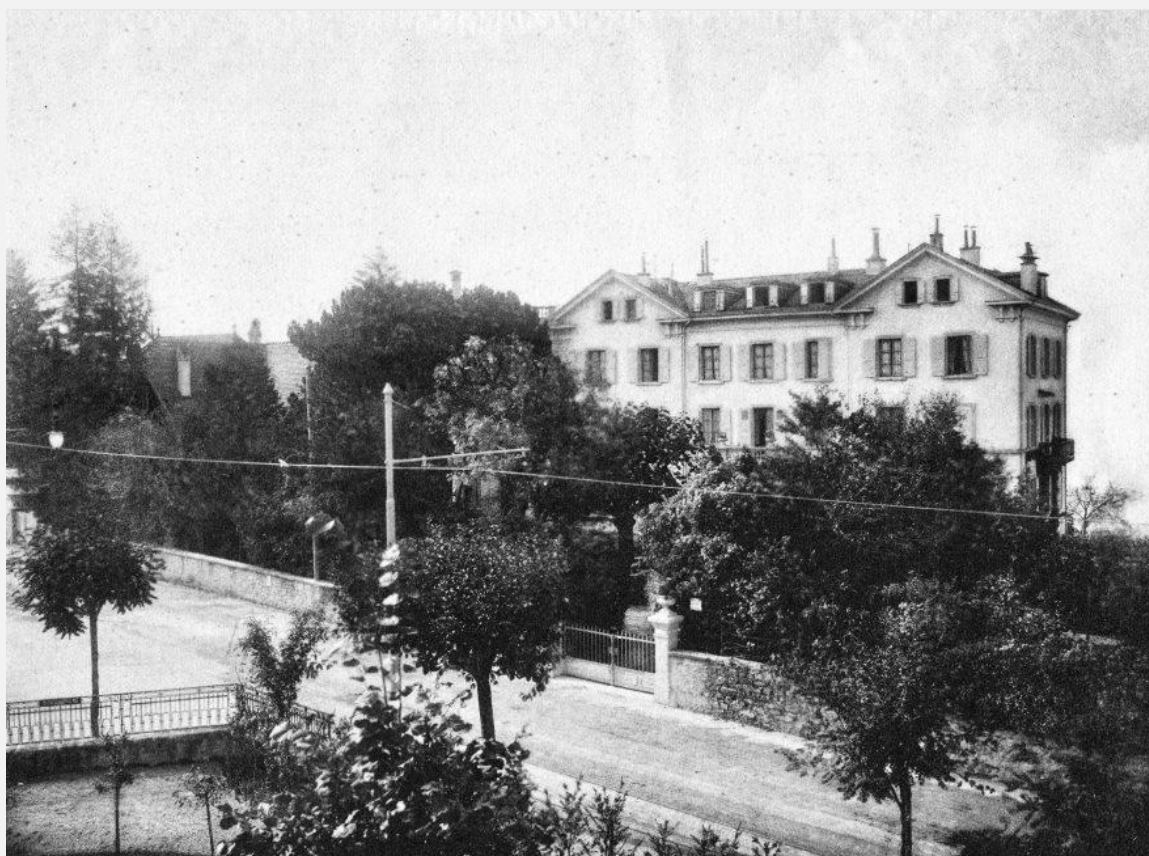


EARLY WARNING

by Gabrielle Griswold© ('44)

In 1937, during my eleventh summer, I spent three months at a boarding-school in Switzerland. This was part of a year abroad with my French godmother, a bilingual educator who was also my mother's dearest friend. During the rest of that eventful year, I lived with her at Cannes and attended a private day school there, the only foreigner in an otherwise all-French student body.

At Bon Rivage, the Swiss school, the mix was international. Some of the girls were French, some Swiss from the French, Italian and German parts of Switzerland, some Italian, some German. One was Polish, one named Gisèle was Czechoslovakian, and a few hailed from other European countries. I was the youngest student there, and the only English-speaking one. Next in age to me was Irène Geiger from Zürich, who was thirteen and my closest friend. All the other girls ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen, most of them sixteen or older. Altogether it was not a large school, and, as this was a summer session, the curriculum was light, and our days close to idyllic.



We studied literature, poetry, music, and sewing, took long and short walks around town, and went by private bus on excursions to places like the medieval Château de

Gruyères to see where the famous cheese was made, and the Nestlé factory whence we took away delicious samples of chocolate candy. We enjoyed a sunny cruise around the Lake of Geneva, strolled the school's garden paths, sat on benches among the flowers reading or doing needlework, and swam in the lake.

Located in a verdant residential section of Vevey-la-Tour, the grounds behind the school ran down through layered gardens to the waterside, where Bon Rivage had its own dock and beach. In particular I recall going down one evening at sunset to swim in rosy waters, beneath a sky of undiluted rose. Across the lake, the snow on the distant mountaintops was stained with rose, and the entire landscape seemed lit with a glow of golden rose. When I dove down beneath the lake's surface and opened my eyes underwater, I swam in a liquid wash of rose, in which I felt myself immersed like a rosy fish in a rosy pond.

But one day a darker note intruded.

On that day I had by chance wandered early—about five minutes before class time—into the classroom where our next lesson would be held. Alone in the room, I sat down at my front-row desk, and raised my eyes to the blackboard. There, chalked up in large capital letters, I saw two looming words: *HEIL HITLER!* Who might have put them there I had no way of knowing. But I had a strong sense that those words were controversial, if not flagrantly divisive. Although, at age eleven, I had no clear sense of international politics, I did understand that the adults I knew viewed Hitler as a bad and dangerous man whose actions somehow threatened world peace.

What to do? I had only seconds in which to decide. With teacher and students due to arrive for class at any moment, if I went up to the blackboard to erase the offending words the very person who had written them might enter and be angered. If, on the other hand, I left them in place, they might upset or anger many more people. Like it or not, I had to act. If I hesitated, the opportunity would be lost, our own peace at Bon Rivage perhaps roiled as a result. There was no time to lose.

As swiftly as I could, I sprang from my seat, raced to the blackboard, seized the felt eraser and, with a couple of vigorous strokes, expunged those words from existence. Then I walked composedly back to my desk, sat down, picked up my book, and started to read. When, minutes later, the door opened and the rest of the class began trickling in, I was to all appearances calmly absorbed in the text.

Later I heard nothing further about this episode, nor did I ever learn who the Nazi in our midst might be. It was, in its small way, my first lesson in diplomacy, and—a harbinger of things to come.