

## **Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

**title:**

Stella: An Album of Self-Discovery

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**source:**

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 41 (2025)

**URL:**

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/41-photoalbums/stella-an-album-of-self-discovery>

**doi:**

<https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2025.41.3078>

**publisher:**

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

**affiliation:**

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

**keywords:**

Stella Szacherska; family archive; photographic albums; motherhood; daughterhood; formative trip; auto-photo-biography

**abstract:**

The author examines her experience of working with the archives of the Rolbieski and Szacherski families. She focuses on three photographic albums by Stella Szacherska (1911–1997), a historian, medievalist, archivist and translator: an album from an educational and formative trip to Cannes, which opens with a self-portrait in the mirror, legitimizing the idea of Stella as a person who consciously uses photography; an album documenting the first year of her daughter Maria Krystyna's life; and an album with photographs from her own childhood, which she probably made as an adult woman. The author ponders what role photography could have played in Stella's life and choices, and how she used it as a self-narrative tool.

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## **Stella: An Album of Self-Discovery**

Women have only first names. By using masculine surnames, they indicate the lineage of others, not their own.

–Jolanta, daughter of Irena, granddaughter of Bronisława, great-granddaughter of Ludwika, *Błony umysłu* (Membranes of the Mind)

An exceptional and strong individuality—a courageous woman, a model wife and mother, a fervent patriot, a person full of modesty but also great strength of will, endowed with a rich spiritual life, and possessing a high level of culture and intellect .... She devoted herself entirely to scholarly work, having exceptional predispositions to do so: profound knowledge, an analytical and inquisitive mind, a sharp critical sense, perfect precision, and excellent command of foreign languages ....

–Stefan K. Kuczyński, Stella Maria Szacherska (1911–1997): In memoriam

Discovering an archive conceived as a testimony to someone's life is an extraordinary experience. Carefully sifting through piles of paper—letters, albums, loose photographs, documents, school notebooks, scraps—is an exciting but demanding task. One has to be constantly on one's guard so as not to overlook anything important, nor jump to conclusions, or impose one's own history.

These and similar thoughts and feelings accompanied me as I discovered the archives of the Szacherski and Rolbieski families.<sup>1</sup> I discovered it slowly, trying to bring forth the histories of individuals and see them as clearly as possible. This led me to a woman named Stella. Her name intrigued me first, followed closely by her very petite, characteristic figure. I quickly realized that she stood at the center of the archive and the archiving process itself—as a historian and a editor of primary sources, determined to preserve the memory of her family. I wish to focus

on her experience, but not through the lens of family relations or the men who defined her. Therefore, I will refer to her simply as "Stella."

I saw her many times in hundreds of photographs. Sometimes, I felt that looking at them taught me something important about Stella. This "something" often contradicted what I had previously imagined. The more I observed how she used photographs rather than focusing on her appearance in them, the closer I got to her—or rather to her generalizable experience. Stella's unconventional photographic story fascinated me, just like her self-narration, which emerges mainly from her albums.

A wartime shock, the disappearance and invalidation of her entire known world, divided her life into two distinct parts. Thanks to the albums and letters, we can trace primarily her prewar and partially her wartime experiences. Without them, we would know little beyond the fact that Stella was the daughter of Emilia and Stanisław Rolbieski, the sister of Roman, and a graduate of a Catholic middle school, that she spent two years abroad, and that shortly afterward she became the wife of Zbigniew Szacherski and, six years later, a mother. Thus, we see her through her place in her family and society. The beginning of the war disrupted the certainty of that place and role; Stella gained an autonomy that she probably did not initially desire. She acted as a liaison officer, an independent woman dedicated to helping those in need, an English teacher, and a translator. After the war, she became a highly talented student, then a doctor of history, an archivist, a recognized medievalist, and an author of numerous articles and studies of primary texts. She filled her name with herself and her work.

Most likely, Stella's name was a tribute to and a commemoration of the underground activities of her aunt, Wanda Rolbieska. As early as 1905, Wanda Rolbieska taught Polish language, literature, and history, and engaged in patriotic activities in Bydgoszcz. From the end of 1908, she did so in the secret society "Stella," which she co-founded and chaired.<sup>2</sup> The aunt had an extraordinarily strong personality, evoking admiration in some and fear in others. She probably played an important role in her niece's life.



Figure 1

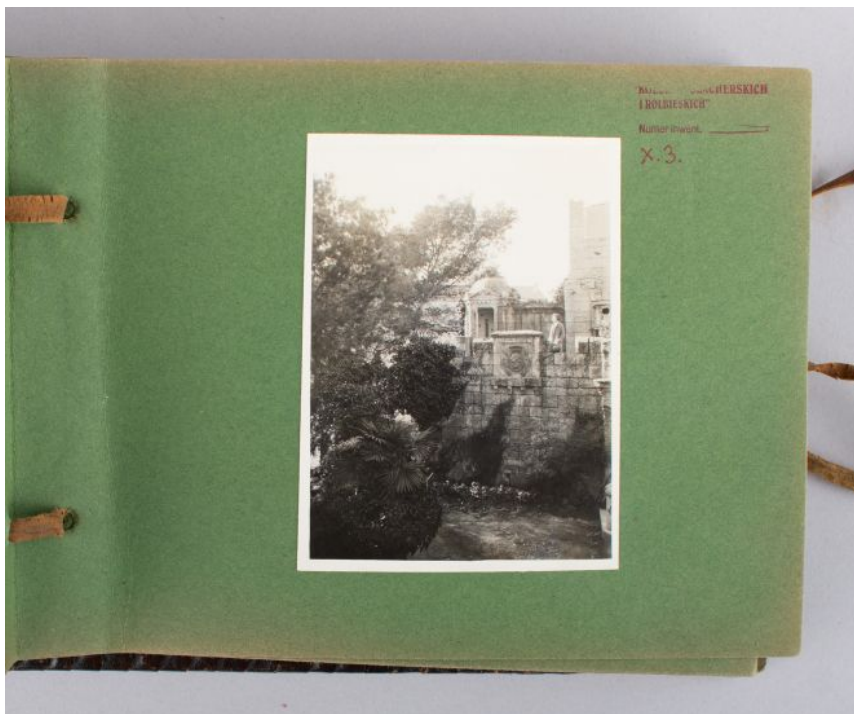
Shortly after moving from Berlin to Bydgoszcz in 1919, Stella began her education at the Girls' Catholic Humanistic Middle School, whose organizer and longtime director happened to be her aunt. Opinions about the school's atmosphere prove somewhat contradictory, though they agree that strict discipline governed the school life and the level of education remained high. Multiple interest clubs operated within the school, including as many as two photographic clubs. Stella belonged to one of them, and she learned the basics of photography there. We know that she continued to take photographs later as well, thanks to a photograph of her with a camera, taken in 1929 during a sea voyage to Stockholm.

In a letter sent shortly after Stella's departure to France, her mother asks: "Do you often use your 'looker'?" (October 22, 1928).<sup>3</sup> The word "looker" (*patrzalka* in Polish) seems both amusing and thought-provoking, as if the camera served as a device for looking, and the photographs recorded this act of looking. How often Stella took photographs



Figure 2

remains unclear, but she certainly did so. A small leather-bound album tied with a leather thong has survived, dedicated almost entirely to her stay at a private language school for girls in Cannes (Figure 1). Were it not for the self-portrait in the mirror, we could perceive this album as a rather typical travel souvenir, although some frames are far from obvious. The album begins with a view of a facade fragment shot from the side, lush vegetation, and a thick tree trunk in the foreground. Next come views from the window and photographs of the immediate surroundings, with plants playing the main role. Then, Stella leads us into the shared room: a glance at a nightstand, a desk, a sleeping area, and herself. The rest of the album includes mostly posed photographs of classmates and Stella in their company. In a few photographs, we can see the photographer's shadow (Figures 2–9).



Figures 3-9

The trip to Cannes marked Stella's first independent long journey. As such, it offered her the opportunity to become someone new, far from the defining gazes of her family. The camera allowed her to find her own voice, to open herself to

a diverse world, and to place herself in those surroundings. I perceive Stella's gestures of photographing herself in the mirror and including the print in the album as very powerful and constitutive in a way (Figure 10). Stella seems aware of photography's creative possibilities and takes advantage of them. Interestingly, the album contains no landscape views. Instead, Stella documents the private space of the room and the immediate surroundings of the school. All other photographs depict her classmates and herself, usually framed rather tightly so that we cannot identify the location. Place evidently holds little significance here; what seems important is a different form of Stella's presence that took shape at the time. Constructing the album—namely careful observation of the photographs, the determination of sequence, and the method of juxtaposing the images—allowed her to document this transformation to some extent. However, rather than through the imagery, the documenting took place through the memory of the moment and the thoughts that filled it during the act of photographing or being photographed.

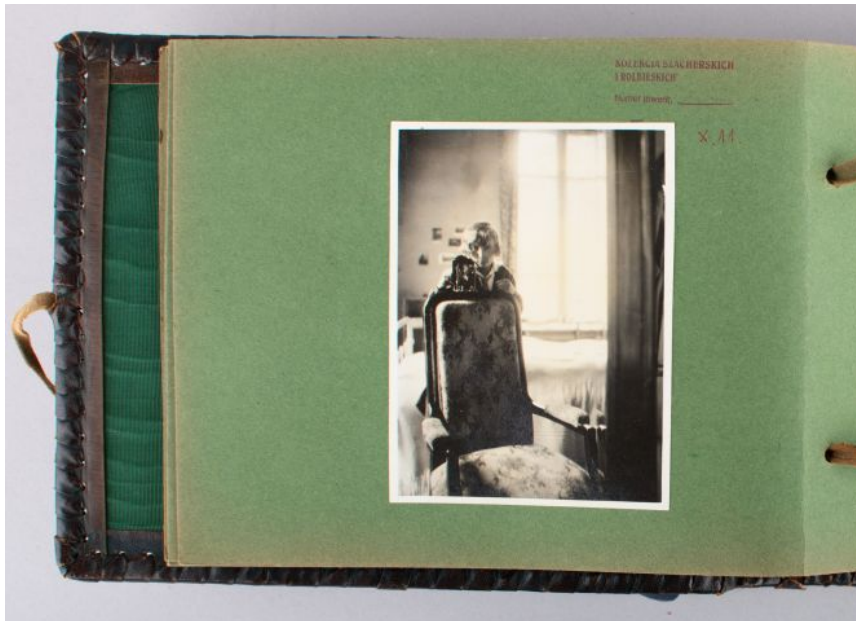


Figure 10

Surrounded by girls from various parts of the world, with most of them from wealthy or very wealthy families, like hers, but raised in different cultural environments, Stella could experience conflicting emotions. Her parents' letters, especially those from her father, give us some insight into these emotions. In his correspondence with his daughter, the father uncovers truths about Stella that he had not even suspected before: "In almost every letter, we find new, beautiful facets of your little soul. At home, a veil sometimes separated us—although transparent, it waved and prevented me from easily recognizing your soul. Perhaps you hid it jealously from others and wanted to keep it only for yourself" (November 30, 1928). The same letter reveals that Stella felt uncomfortable at the French school. The father expresses his disappointment: "I never imagined that my little energetic Stella would fail to manage on her own. Instead of acting, she breaks down and cries with [?]." Less than three months later, the parents received a letter from Madame Palet, the school's owner, who informed them that Stella planned to leave Cannes at the end of the second trimester. Without attempting to dissuade her from this decision, they nonetheless insisted that she should not return to Poland

before spring arrived, due to her health. "What now, dear Stelluś, Herkules am Scheidewege!" (February 14, 1929). I do not know how her journey continued, but she definitely traveled to England and returned home in 1930.

I have no access to Stella's letters, yet I assume that she discovered and constructed herself within these writings. She seems to have engaged in the same process when creating her albums, only more consciously. I wonder how Stella imagined her future. Did she want something different from what her upbringing prescribed? Did she dream of a home like the one she grew up in, or rather of independence, courage, and wisdom that her aunt Wanda embodied?

Adrienne Rich's words on motherhood and daughterhood come to mind at this point:

Many women have been caught—have split themselves—between two mothers: one, usually the biological one, who represents the culture of domesticity, of male-centeredness, of conventional expectations, and another, perhaps a woman artist or teacher, who becomes the countervailing figure. Often this "counter-mother" is an athletics teacher who exemplifies strength and pride in her body, a freer way of being in the world; or an unmarried woman professor, alive with ideas, who represents the choice of a vigorous work life, of "living alone and liking it." This splitting may allow the young woman to fantasize alternately living as one or the other "mother," to test out two different identifications. But it can also lead to a life in which she never consciously resolves the choices, in which she alternately tries to play the hostess and please her husband as her mother did, and to write her novel or doctoral thesis. She has tried to break through the existing models, but she has not gone far enough, usually because nobody has told her how far there is to go.

Rich shows that the dilemma might prove apparent, although

any sense of internal split may seem real. Oftentimes, one needs something more than the desire to break away from the framework of one's family and imposed role.

In 1931, Stella married Zbigniew Szacherski, an officer ten years older than her. During their engagement, Stella created an album in which she arranged photographs of her father, her brother, herself, and Szacherski on one page, as if testing whether everyone fit together.



Figures 11-21

However, the most intriguing piece remains the album that documents the first year of Stella's daughter, Maria Krystyna, born on August 28, 1937. At first glance, the album might resemble a conventional visual story about the happiness brought into a family by a newborn child—the forming of relationships, a display of shared joy, and the fulfillment of everyone's wish to pose with the baby. Nevertheless, when we ask about the album's intended recipients and function or wonder whether it was meant to actualise itself with each viewing, the answers prove neither obvious nor unambiguous. I do not think that Stella planned to show the album to anyone, perhaps except for Maria Krystyna, as the emerging story feels too personal. Rather than through individual photographs,

this story manifests itself through their arrangement, repetitions, multiplications, and mutual relationships. Stella both authored the album—although she did not take all the photographs included—and seemingly functions as its primary addressee (Figures 11–21).

The album opens with a photograph of Szacherski in uniform, holding his daughter, who sinks into her swaddling clothes (September 27, 1937). The next images show the little Maria with a nanny, and then Maria alone. Stella appears on the fifth page, standing behind a deep pram with her daughter inside, accompanied by two women, a young girl, and dogs. Only on the sixth and seventh pages can we see four photographs of Maria with both parents, likely frame by frame; in one photograph, the girl cries. Several following pages contain photographs taken on the day of Maria's baptism (October 16, 1937). One image draws me most strongly: Stella stands in a bathrobe, her hair slightly disheveled and gathered at the back. This is her only photograph of its kind in the archive.<sup>5</sup> Much like the self-portrait in the mirror, her gaze feels very intense, as if she looked at us only apparently, too, while in fact she watched herself closely (Figure 22).



Figure 22

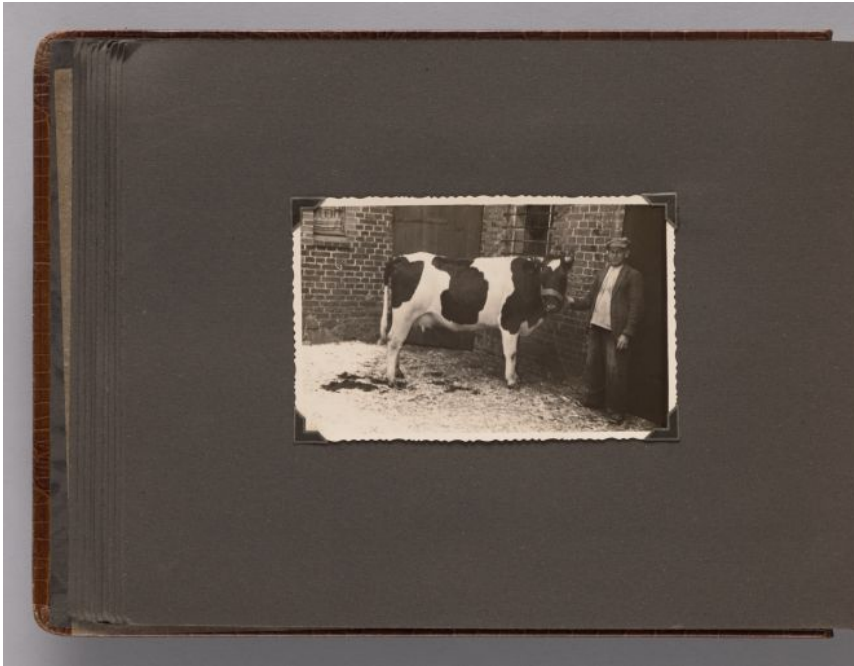


Figure 23

The photograph of a cow surprises me. A man in dirty work clothes grasps the animal's harness (Figure 23) (on the facing page, Maria rests in the arms of her uncle). The frame with the cow is tight, like most of the others, yet wide enough to reveal the realities of the animal's life: a brick building with barred windows, ground marked by manure. The cow is positioned sideways—perhaps to make its udder clearly visible and the man holds the cow's head so that it looks toward the camera. This cannot be just any cow; instead, we must be looking at Maria's surrogate nurse. The photograph itself does not puzzle me, yet its inclusion in the album does. Stella must have placed it there because she wanted to remember the cow and her actual experience of motherhood, preventing it from dissolving beneath layers of fabrication and distorted recollection. I imagine that Stella may have taken the picture herself, perhaps during a trip or a walk with her daughter, to whom she pointed out the cow-mother and explained how much she owed the animal.



Figures 24-29

Suddenly, the album begins to condense; the legible external narrative layer halts in favor of something that resembles a multiplied presence: proliferated faces and bodies, capturing the same movement or shift in facial expression in several different moments. Seen simultaneously, they seem to move, suggesting the flickering of existence or perception. In this multiplication, we grasp something that single photographs cannot reveal: an illusion of life, but also an almost obsessive desire on Stella's part to preserve as much as possible. Perhaps she wanted to find something unchanging in the constantly shifting face of her daughter or to see all of her daughter's faces at once. No shot appears accidental. The statuesque Stella always remains prepared for the picture. When she photographs herself with her daughter—especially at the beginning—she embraces her slightly, but also displays and tames the child, pressing it to herself. Stella photographs Maria with the grandmother, the grandfather, and her brother Roman, reflecting the new family arrangement and energy (Figures 24-27). Two triple portraits seem particularly significant—of grandmother Emilia, Maria, and Stella (Figures 28-29). The little

girl separates the two women and connects them at once. Near one of the portraits, Stella placed a cropped enlargement showing only a fragment of the mother's/grandmother's face (Figure 29). Beneath these apparently obvious portraits of the daughter (Stella) with the mother and her own daughter—and their adjacency—something seems to tremble, something that one cannot name or show. An internal shock, a wrenching of the most powerful bond seen with the painful clarity: the fact of no longer being only a daughter, but now also a mother.

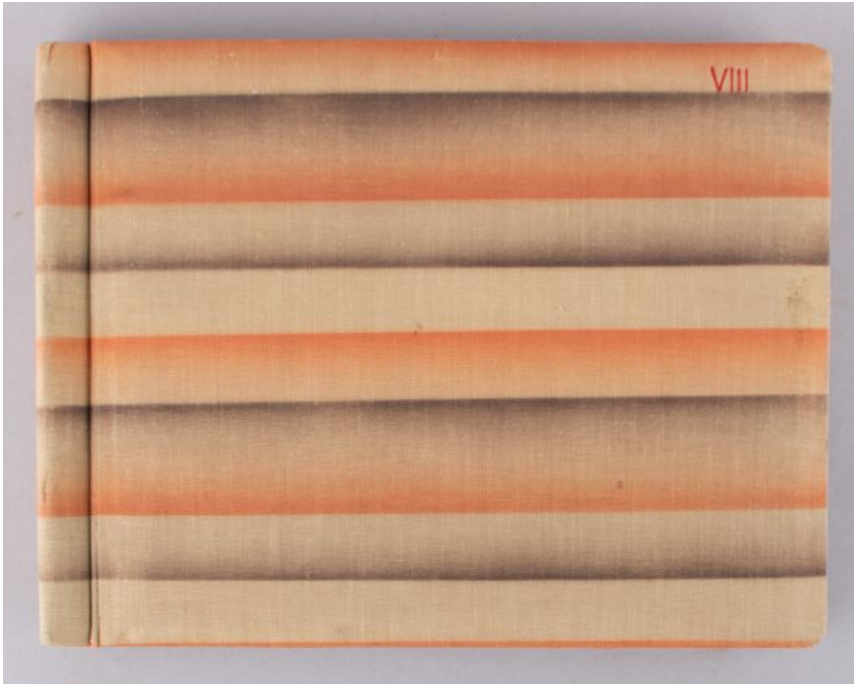


Figures 30-31

On one of the pages, Stella arranged five photographs of herself holding her daughter (Figures 30-31). The central one proves the most compelling, as Stella covered the girl's blurred figure with another one, cut out from a similar print. Many cut-out prints appear in the other albums as well, but this act of montage and replacement of a figure remains unique. I wonder why Stella cared so deeply about the presence of that photograph—could it be that she saw something in her own face that she did not want to lose? This also demonstrates that her album left no room for imperfections. Instead, she

allowed for manipulation of the prints, using them as tools rather than mere fragments of reality. Stella does not project a dreamed or idealized world but tries to record it consistently with her experience. For her, photography and the album serve as tools of self-discovery and means to understand—or at least to accept—how much has changed: to see her previous self as someone else, as a new Stella. I find it intriguing to consider these techniques, which disrupt photographs' straightforward reference to reality, in the context of photography's connection to women's experience. Patrizia di Bello discusses this aspect in an inspiring way:

There is something particularly interesting in using photography to represent feminine experiences. The truth of both photography and femininity was supposed to reside in their closeness to nature, in their potential as natural means of reproduction. But ... the use of collage and mixed media techniques undermines the realism of photography, its power to reproduce nature faithfully by using technologies based on natural optical and chemical phenomena. In the albums both photography and femininity are reconfigured in ways that suggest that they are also performative cultural constructions. Photography was supposed to represent the truth about nature, and femininity to be the nature of women. In the album pages we have been looking at, these suppositions are placed in an ambiguous and unstable relationship with each other, and with changing definitions of socially sanctioned or fashionable lifestyles.



Figures 31-37

Shortly afterward—possibly already after the tragic deaths of her parents and brother in October 1939—Stella assembled an album with photographs from her childhood and early youth (Figure 31). The album opens with a circularly cut photograph, glued in the center of the page, showing young Stella and her brother Roman, three years her senior. Embraced by a nanny or a woman who held another role in the household, they sit on the grass. In the bottom corner, we see a small image of Stella, cut from a different print (Figure 32). The parents or another close person took some of the photographs—in a letter, Stella’s mother mentions how they photographed one another in the garden. One of these photographs might be the one that captures a pretend wedding (Figure 33). A visible crease runs through the middle of the photograph; perhaps someone carried it in a pocket or hid it inside a book. Stella recalls this play and references this particular photograph in a draft letter—will written to her daughter shortly after the murder of her parents and brother.<sup>7</sup> Then, Stella juxtaposes private photographs with studio portraits (Figures 34–36). The juxtaposition lacks a portrait of her father, Stanisław Rolbieski. We can see him in a garden photograph,

standing casually, with a gentle gaze directed at the lens (Figure 37). Perhaps that was how Stella remembered or wished to remember him. Her aunt, Wanda Rolbieska, appears twice, seen from afar and above. In one photograph, the aunt speaks during an event in the middle school's auditorium; in another, she sits on a rock in the mountains, dressed in light clothing that blends with the surroundings. These photographs seem to indicate that, even when apparently absent or distant, the aunt remained present, perhaps as a point of reference or as the person who opened Stella to a more diverse world (Figure 38). The last album, chronologically, contains photographs from around 1940 or 1941. Visually, the album closely resembles the one in which Stella attempts to recognize herself as a mother. Many pages remain blank. This might have been the last album Stella created—perhaps because she did not want to or could not tell the story of her wartime experience, or perhaps because she found another way to look at herself.

While working with the Rolbieski-Szacherski archive, I experienced various emotions toward Stella, which often proved distant from one another. I wondered whether those feelings might not arise or whether, despite their presence, I could think and speak about her without crossing a barely visible, sometimes vanishing boundary—one I neither have the right nor wish to cross. Now, I feel this is possible. In addition to a fragment of Stella's somewhat generalized story, I have gained a broad field for reflecting on photography in the context of family archives. I can consider it outside the categories of authorship, aesthetic or any other value, and quality, far from the division between professional



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and amateur photography. Moreover, I can attempt to think about language that might meet archives' complexity and ambiguity. Regardless of their form and author, photographs in such archives usually have a private character, which often renders them obscure or silent. These photographs begin to speak only when we see how they might have functioned, how they were used, what purposes they served, and why someone wanted to preserve them. Such a perspective suggests what new questions we can ask these pictures.

### Figures:

- Stella Szacherska's album from her stay in Cannes, 1928-1929, Museum of Warsaw, Szacherski and Rolbieski Collection, MP/1879/1-91/D (select leafs)
- Album from the first year of the life of Maria Krystyna Szacherska, Stella's daughter", 1937-1938, Museum of Warsaw, Szacherski and Rolbieski Collection, MP/1880/1-150/D (select leafs)
- Album with photos from Stella Szacherska's childhood and youth, lata 40. XX w., Museum of Warsaw, Szacherski and Rolbieski Collection, MP/1878/1-53/D (select leafs)

- 1 The Museum of Warsaw stores the Rolbieski-Szacherski Collection as a deposit. The collection includes furniture, clothing, medals, paintings, clocks, books, and many other objects. An essential part of the collection involves the archive—a set of various written documents and photographs: more than two thousand loose prints and thirteen albums of different forms and purposes. In this text, I concentrate on three of the albums authored by Stella Rolbieska-Szacherska.
- 2 Rajmund Kuczma, "Pani przełożona dyrektorka Wanda Rolbieska," *BIK. Bydgoski Informator Kulturalny*, no. 9 (145) (September 1986): 46-7.
- 3 Stella probably departed at the end of September 1928, and began a French course in October.
- 4 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York:

W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1976), 247–8.

- 5 A loose print from the same session has also survived, differing slightly in the arrangement of the figures.
- 6 Patrizia di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 153.
- 7 "Now open the piano, Maryna! A flannel cover, embroidered with the first bars of Chopin's nocturne, lies on the yellowed keys. How often we played with that cover! Uncle wore it as a stole when we pretended that he was a priest. He used it to crown a king, dressed splendidly in a cherry-colored bedspread from the bedroom, or to bless a young couple, as in the photograph from the Berlin days."

