Daguerreotypes in the photographic collection of the Estonian Literary Museum

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The Estonian Literary Museum, administered by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, is a research and development institution that also carries the functions of a central archive of national sciences and of an archival library. The museum was founded in 1940 by merging the Archival Library, the Estonian Bibliographic Foundation, the Estonian Folklore Archive and the Estonian Cultural History Archive, all previously part of the Estonian National Museum. The true rarities of the Estonian Cultural History Archive’s photo collection are its five daguerreotypes that include the oldest (ca. 1844) daguerreotypes that include the oldest (ca. 1844).

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The Estonian Cultural History Archive (EKLA) was founded in 1929, following the merger of the manuscript collections of the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Literary Society, the Academic Literary Society and the Academic History Society. This laid the foundation for purposeful collection of cultural history source materials that remains one of the institution’s primary tasks to this day, in addition to their systematization, archiving and preservation.

The versatile photographic archive of EKLA mainly comprises personal collections, to a lesser extent collections of better-known Estonian photographers (R. Sachker, J. and P. Parikas, E. Kald, E. Selleke, K. Suur et al.), as well as collections of various institutions, organizations, associations, historical and cultural events, towns etc. Individual contributions, mainly from voluntary donations, that are assembled in the so-called “mixed collection” are no less significant. The 2001 follow-up project “Kirjanik ja tema keskkond” (The Writer and his Environment) has enhanced the photo collection with new and interesting photographs of writers, poets, translators and scholars of literature. The archive, that will soon celebrate its 86th year, now includes almost 300,000 photographs, negatives and digital files.

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### THE FIVE DAGUERREOTYPES BELONGING TO THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION OF THE ESTONIAN CULTURAL HISTORY ARCHIVE (EKLA)

EKLA A-37:1254 Unidentified daguerreotypist. Portrait of Carl Johann von Seidlitz’ children Marie, Georg Karl Maria and Karl Johann Maria, ca. 1844. (ill. 1)

EKLA B-37:1478 Unidentified daguerreotypist. Portrait of Carl Johann von Seidlitz, n.d. (ill. 2)

EKLA reg. 1940/28 Unidentified daguerreotypist. Portrait of Justine von Seidlitz with daughters Justine and Helene, n.d. (ill. 3)

EKLA A-12:2 Robert Borchardt (attr.). Portrait of Fr. R. Kreutzwald’s wife Marie with her daughter Adelheid and her son Aleksis, ca. 1853. (ill. 4)

EKLA B-85:112 Unidentified daguerreotypist. Portrait of Leopold Krohn, n.d. (ill. 5)

### ABSTRACT

The Estonian Literary Museum, in the administrative area of the Ministry of Education and Research, was founded in 1940 by merging the Archival Library, the Estonian Bibliographic Foundation, the Estonian Folklore Archive and the Estonian Cultural History Archive, all previously belonging to the Estonian National Museum. The Estonian Cultural History Archive (EKLA), created in 1929 as a result of merging older archival collections, continues to this day to serve its original purpose, including collection, systematization and preservation of cultural history source materials. The versatile photographic archive of EKLA mainly comprises personal collections, to a lesser extent collections of better-known Estonian photographers, as well as collections of various institutions, organizations, associations, historical and cultural events, towns etc. Currently this archive holds more than 300,000 photographs, negatives and digital files.

The collection’s rarities include five daguerreotypes, three of which come from the family photo archive of the Seidlitzes, one from that of Fr. R. Kreutzwald and one from the archive of Aino and Oskar Kallas. The one that deserves to be highlighted is the oldest known extant daguerreotype in Estonia. This portrays the children, Marie, Georg Karl Maria and Karl Johann Maria, of the Baltic German physician and naturalist Carl Johann von Seidlitz (1798-1885). Even though the daguerreotype is not precisely dated, it is believed to have been made in Saint Petersburg in 1844 based on a list of names and dates of birth of the children on the back of the photograph. Great attention has been paid to the finish of the photograph: octagonal mount, glazed with strips of patterned gold paper framing the sides. It is clear that preparation work prior to taking the photograph was thorough with attention paid to every single detail. The result is a majestic and dignified photographic memory fitting for a noble family, and one given an important position in the history of photography.

### KEY WORDS:
History of Estonian Photography, Estonian Literary Museum, Carl Johann von Seidlitz (1798-1885), Robert Borchardt

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Ill. 1. Unidentified daguerreotypist, detail of a daguerreotype portrait of Carl Johann von Seidlitz’ children Marie, Georg Karl Maria and Karl Johann Maria, ca. 1844. Housing size: 13.3 x 11.0 x 0.6 cm, window size: 8.3 x 6.8 cm., inv. EKLA A-37:1254

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As mentioned before, the oldest known and preserved daguerreotype in Estonia, Portrait of Carl Johann von Seidlitz’ children, most probably dates back to 1844 (ILL. 1). This approximate dating has been provided by photographer, film operator and journalist Peeter Tooming, when mapping Estonia’s photographic rarities in the 1980s. The assessment is based on a list of children’s names and birth dates on the back of the daguerreotype. The children are off spring of the Seidlitz family, the children of Carl Johann von Seidlitz to be precise.

Carl Johann von Seidlitz (1798-1885) was a well-known Baltic German physician and naturalist. He was born in Tallinn, studied medicine at the University of Tartu in 1815-1821 and defended a doctoral thesis on “Eye diseases common among Estonians”. He perfected his education in several top European medical facilities and also worked as a military physician. Von Seidlitz served as a professor at the Saint Petersburg Medical-Surgical Academy in 1837-1847 and received the title of a service nobleman from Emperor Nicholas I in 1846.

After his years in Saint Petersburg, C. J. von Seidlitz moved to the Meeri manor near Tartu that he had purchased a few years earlier and became an active contributor in several institutions. He was president of the Estonian Naturalists Society and the first to introduce Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in Estonia. He was among the pioneers of railroad construction in Estonia and Livonia. The most important work Seidlitz undertook in his later years was the summarizing and publication of the results of a general geometric levelling carried out by the Livonian Utility and Economic Society in volumes I and II of “General-Nivellement von Livland” (Tartu, 1877,1883). This publication laid the foundations for determining the height relationships of the topography of Livonia and found practical use in water management and land improvement work in manors. Elevation maps were included (EKLA f 194 m 59:38).

C. J. von Seidlitz has been described as a very active, energetic and versatile man, and it is probable he was precisely that. He was even referred to as a scholar of literature in Russia after he compiled the biography of his friend and famous poet Vasily Zhukovsky. In addition

1844) and largest (12.1x16.2 cm) preserved daguerreotype in Estonia.

The arrival of the first three is dated 10. XII 1940 (reg. 1940/28 – Ill.3) as part of E. v. Seidlitz’s collection (Ills. 1, 2 and 3) of letters and photographs, presented by the Tartu apartment committee. It is probable the collection in question was a part of the cultural heritage of the Seidlitz family of Meeri manor in Tartu County and later of the city of Tartu, that was in the possession of the grandson of Carl Johann von Seidlitz, Ernst Carl Maria von Seidlitz (1881-1964).

The daguerreotype of the Kreutzwald family attributed to Robert Borchardt (ILL. 4) was presented to the archives after the liquidation of the Society for the Preservation of Kreutzwald’s Memory in 17. XII 1940 (reg. 1941/2). Even though it remains questionable, it is the only one of the five daguerreotypes with a known photographer, Robert Borchardt. Aino and Oskar Kallas’ library also brought to the Literary Museum their manuscript collection and family photographs. The materials were presented by the city of Tallinn’s financial department of the time. The register book entry of the materials is dated 24. IX 1946; the same registration number (1946/69) includes a daguerreotype of Leopold Krohn. Unfortunately this rarity also lacks information concerning the photographer responsible and the date it was taken.

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III. 2. Unidentified daguerreotypist. Carl Johann von Seidlitz, not dated. Housing size: 17.8x13.0x0.5 cm, window size: 7.6x10.3 cm, Estonian Literary Museum, inv. EKLA B-37:1478


III. 4. Robert Borchardt (attr). Fr. R. Kreutzwald’s wife Marie, daughter Adelheid and son Aleksis, ca. 1853. Housing size: 11.1x9.5x0.6 cm, window size: 6.4x5.6 cm, Estonian Literary Museum, inv. EKLA A-12:2
to his diverse activities, Seidlitz was also a lord of the manor - he purchased the Meeri, the Unipiha and Väätsa manors in 1841. These manors remained in the family until their nationalization in 1919.

The portrait of Carl Johann von Seidlitz’ children was probably made in Saint Petersburg as Carl Johann von Seidlitz was working for the Academy at the time, as well as the fact the children in the photograph were born in Russia. It captures only three of the five children Seidlitz had by the time as one of the children had died, while Justine Katharine (1842-1923) was probably too young at two years old for the required patience and ability to stand still. It is clear that preparation work prior to taking the photograph has been thorough with attention paid to every single detail. The result is a majestic and dignified photographic memory fitting for a noble family, and one given an honourable position in the history of photography. The daguerreotype’s finish has been paid special attention, sporting an octagonal mount fastened to glass by the strips of patterned gold paper which frame the sides. The leather-covered back includes the following information:

Marie v. Seidlitz 1832.4.11. Petersburg - 1903.11.20. Baden
Georg v. Seidlitz 1840.6.7. Petersburg
Karl Maria v. Seidlitz 1838.7.11. Petersburg - 1897.6.21. Dorpat

These entries reveal that the names of the children and their dates of birth and death along with locations were added at a later time, but not after 1917, as that is the year of Georg Karl Maria von Seidlitz’ death. The approximate time the photograph was taken is determined on the latter as the youngest child present who at the time could have been four years old. This determination of age inevitably remains questionable, however, and it cannot be ruled out that the daguerreotype could be from either the year before or after.

The image on the daguerreotype is remarkably well-preserved considering the time it was taken. The composition speaks of careful consideration and forethought, not only as concerns the placement and arrangement of each piece of furniture but also minor details (curtain and canvas creases, houseplant). The image is given splendour by the dress and carefully arranged hair of the children as well as their postures and expressions - as is fitting for a noble family. This is probably the reason why it has often been mistakenly believed that the picture depicts a mother and her children - Marie, who was 12 years old at the time, really does appear older in the photograph.

Knowing the complexity involved in making daguerreotypes as well as how time-consuming the process was, the photographer’s ability to manage the children deserves praise. The result is a wonder of photography that reflects having one’s picture taken as a major event at the time, and one that is still able to inspire interest and excitement in viewers no less than 170 years later.

English translation by Marcus Turovski