

*The Diaries of Caspar Meuseler
from Tallinn¹*

Introduction

The history of Tallinn (Reval), the capital of the Republic of Estonia, can be characterized as hybrid and diverse. The castle Lindanýse, built by local Estonian tribes on the Cathedral Hill, was captured by the Danes in the 13th century. The area around Tallinn remained in Danish possession for a century; after that the German crusaders gained control over northern Estonia. However, already during the Danish period German merchants had arrived in Tallinn to make use of the promising location of the harbour, which was on trade routes between Russia and Western Europe. Along with these changes the town developed a remarkable linguistic diversity, since it was inhabited by Germans, Estonians, Danes, Finns, Swedes and Russians. Nevertheless, the official language of the town was German and the Germans were at the top of the social hierarchy². This situation remained unchanged even after the Germans were defeated by the Swedes in the 16th century. Although the political framework changed, the Germans still maintained control over major decisions in the life of the town.

The first half of the 17th century in Tallinn, which is the focus of this article, can be characterized on the one hand by financial decline but on the other hand by the increase of literary activities in the town. The golden Hanseatic era was over and the town was struggling to survive. However, the period can also be regarded as “relatively steady” (Gierlich 1991: 12) because there were no wars or epidemics. From the 1630s onwards, the town was revived by multiple cultural impulses, accompanying the German newcomers, who were escaping from the Thirty Years’ War in German lands. The most important developments in the cultural field of the town were connected with the foundation of the Gymnasium (1631) (see Põldvee

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² During the Hanseatic period only Germans were allowed to own property (see Erbe 1935: 16).

2011) and with the visit of the famous German poet Paul Fleming. The literary life of the town began to flourish (see Klöker 2005).

The author, whose writings are analyzed in this paper, was not a scholar. His name was Caspar Meuseler³ (1569–1651) and he was a merchant and an alderman of the Great Guild, which was an association of merchants in the town.

Meuseler's two diaries were written between 1610–1621 and 1621–1641. The language of the text is Low German, a variety of the German language. The manuscript is kept in the City Archives in Tallinn. The author deals primarily with the matters of the Guild in his entries, but some reflections about himself can also be found. The latter makes the writings remarkable as interesting milestones in the history of autobiographical writing. It must be noted that there were other aldermen from the Great Guild before Meuseler whose diaries are also extant – Gerd Kampferbeck (diaries from 1560 to 1563) as well as Hans Schmidt (from 1585 to 1589). Compared to these older writings Meuselers texts are notable because of their originality and high personal content. These observations form the basis for the hypothesis of the paper, that official diaries like Meuseler's can and should be considered as one of the early pre-forms to modern, literary autobiographical writings.

The entries in Meuseler's diary begin with dates and describe the extraordinary or important events in the life of the town. Meuseler had a position within the upper class which enabled him to have an insider's view on the decisions and actions in the town. When the Westphalian family of Meuselers arrived in Tallinn at the end of the 16th century, it was a booming Hanseatic town. This might have influenced Meuseler's critical judgements over certain decisions made by the City Council.

Meuseler's text had already received scientific attention in the 19th century. Eugen von Nottbeck, a Baltic-German historian, used Meuseler's diaries as a source for describing the life of the town community in the Swedish era (Nottbeck 1887). Nottbeck was only interested in the depictions; he quoted long passages from Meuseler's text and translated them into German. For the quotes in this paper Nottbeck's translations are used. A new edition and translation of Meuseler's complete work is in process in cooperation with Bielefeld University.

³ Musler, Muiseler, as well as Meusler are also possible as variations of the same name.

The paper states that Meuseler's diaries are valuable because they include rare and early expressions of subjectivity. The elements of literature in the texts written by Meuseler will be addressed and analyzed. This approach to the above-mentioned diary broadens the idea of the "literary life" of a town and makes it possible to include texts, which were not originally produced nor received as literature. Martin Klöker defines "literary life" as "the sum of the relationships and actions between all the persons and institutions, which are involved in the processes of creation, distribution and active reception of literature" (Klöker 2011: 13). Literature is in this case defined only as fictional literature. However, in this paper the term "literary life of a town" includes all "literary activities being conducted within a town", according to the definition by Anthony J. Harper (1996: 102).

When we regard merchant's diaries of Early Modern times as transitional forms between non-literary writings and literary ego-documents (see Niefanger 2006: 231), a critical discussion of these diaries is necessary to show the evolution of autobiographical writing from its pre-forms until today. As numerous German scholars have emphasized in their work about German lands, one of the beginnings of modern autobiographical writing can be found in the documentation by town citizens (see Rein 1998: 323; Wilpert 2001: 808; Meid 2000: 878; Brunner 1997: 329). By analyzing Meuseler's works we can determine whether the same types of development of the genre can be found in the literary life of Tallinn in Early Modern times.

Biographical notes about Caspar Meuseler

As noted earlier, Caspar Meuseler was an alderman of the Great Guild and therefore held a notable position in the town. The members of the Great Guild often were participants in negotiations, which the town held with the representatives of the Swedish government. Aldermen also contributed to the monitoring of the incomes and expenses of the town (see Köhler 2003: 270). Unfortunately there are no detailed works about the social structure and networks, which determined the everyday life of a merchant in Early Modern Tallinn. According to Meike Köhler, there has been little research into the social and cultural field of leading merchants in Tallinn (see Köhler 2003: 258). Hence it is not possible to give detailed information about certain members of the elite among the Tallinn merchants.

Up to this point we have known that Meuseler died in 1651; during the research for this paper I was able to discover, with help from German colleagues, that Meuseler was born in 1569 in Osnabrück. In 1596 he became a citizen of Tallinn. It is very possible that Coord (Conrad) Meuseler (1608–1684), a later member of the City Council, was a son of Caspar Meuseler (see Laurenty 1925: 269; Bunge 1874: 115). Meuseler probably also had a daughter Margaretha (?-1684) (Laurenty 1925: 269). In the diaries the names of Euert and Rotgert Meuseler are also mentioned, it is likely that these men were his sons.

According to Martin Klöker, alderman Meuseler was known in the circles of the scholars in Tallinn (Klöker 2005: 460). An occasional poem dedicated to Meuseler supports this idea (Scultetus in Klöker 2005: 269). It is also known that the son of Caspar Meuseler, Conrad, was honoured with a number of occasional poems when he married Christina Müller on the 15th of January, 1638. The authors of these poems were professors from Tallinn Gymnasium, Heinrich Arninck, Timotheus Polus, Reiner Brockmann and Heinrich Vulpius; there was also a student of the same Gymnasium, Caspar von Wangersheim (see Klöker 2005: 174–175).

Low German in Tallinn in the Early Modern era – the linguistic background of the diaries

Paul Johansen has described the linguistic situation in Tallinn at the turn of the 17th century as follows:

[...] it is most likely, that the plebeian spoke Estonian, the middle class spoke Swedish and poor Low German, as well as Estonian, and the upper class and the craftsmen of higher status spoke a cultivated, Hanseatic Low German. The common attitude to spoken language is conservative, sometimes almost archaic, with some Westphalian accent, but from the 16th century the Low German is noticeably infiltrated with loanwords from standard High German.⁴ (Johansen 1973: 376)

According to Johansen's linguistic classification, Meuseler should have belonged to the group speaking a "cultivated, Hanseatic Low German". As Tiina Kala has emphasized, the Low German in Tallinn did not show

⁴ The materials in Low German, studied by Johansen, were "Livländische Chronik" by Balthasar Russow (1578), town laws, court materials, *Burspraken*, petitions, deeds, letters and literary texts.

features of isolation, even though the geographical distance from Germany was considerable. The steady inflow of Germans from northwestern Germany and the active economic contacts between Tallinn and Germany prevented the language from becoming localized (Kala 2004: 11).

Written languages in the Middle Ages were Latin and Low German (see Beyer 2009: 182). But after the triumph of the reformation and the decline of the Hanseatic League, the linguistic situation in Tallinn began to change. Standard German forcefully entered the linguistic landscape of the town. In written texts standard German prevailed in the 17th century, although Low German remained a spoken variety (see Beyer 2009: 28; Klöker 2005: 117). Among the town inhabitants, the scholars were the first to switch to standard German. During the lifetime of Meuseler the occasional poems of the scholars in Tallinn were increasingly written in standard German, although Latin also maintained a solid position (see Heero 2011: 197). The appearance of Estonian (Valmet 2000: 50) and Low German (Beyer⁵ 2009: 185–191) in occasional poems could probably be identified as a linguistic bauble.

Among the merchants, the written Low German was used considerably longer. Beyer claims that the switch from written Low German to written standard German had some transitional periods, during which mixed forms of both languages appeared (Beyer 2009: 183). Klöker emphasizes that the steady increase of standard German must have bewildered the town citizens, because language is a part of the life “which is greatly linked to everyday experience and is grounded on tradition” (Klöker 2005: 70). The estimated research on Meuseler’s diaries from a linguistic point of view promises to reveal new aspects about the use of Low German in Tallinn in the Early Modern era.

The diaries of Caspar Meuseler

The diary of Caspar Meuseler consists of two booklets. In 1610 Meuseler began to keep notes and in 1621 he started a new booklet, presumably because the first booklet was full. The booklets differ in shape. The later diary has lines on the sheets and its shape corresponds to present day A4 standards, whereas the first diary has no lines and is not as wide. On the

⁵ Beyer’s examples are from Tartu.

cover of the earlier booklet there is a coat of arms of the Great Guild and the dates “1616 bis 1620”. However, the notes begin with the date 1610.

The booklets are bound manuscripts with the first diary having 63 pages and the second 103. The pages are inscribed on both sides. The first 12 pages and the front cover are missing from the second booklet.

The paper with lines in the second booklet could have been the same type of paper, which Meuseler used for his notes on business matters. The merchants’ habit of taking notes created a precondition for later autobiographical writings by this group of people. Beside the objective-factual issues, the merchants began to consider more subjective and emotional issues of importance as well and therefore worth recording. The lines on the paper, originally meant for prices and amounts, support the idea of this transformational process.

The entries in the diaries of Meuseler deal primarily with the different political and economic issues of the town. It can be assumed that Meuseler had a task to keep a chronicle of the Great Guild. But Meuseler as the author is also present and by commenting on the described events or processes, he offers his own subjective and critical perspective. This subjective characteristic makes the diaries of Meuseler a good example of the transition from chronicles to later autobiographical writings. It must be emphasized though that the descriptions prevail over the reflections, a feature which Marianne Meid has also stated about similar texts in German lands (2000: 879). Nevertheless, these early pre-forms of later literary diaries and autobiographies can help us to trace the evolution of the autobiographical conscience. It will be shown that Meuseler uses his subjective opinion, proverbs and even verses to enhance his text and to influence the interpretation of the described events by his readers.

To illustrate the contextual framework for Meuseler’s diaries, it must be said that fluent crossovers between the poetry and non-literary texts were characteristic of the literary genres in the Early Modern era. (Niefanger 2006: 231; Nivre 2009: 18). Adolf Rein stated as early as the beginning of the 20th century in his explications about autobiography that this genre “[...] did not emerge over night from the cultural background of just one century, but rather developed from a number of pre-forms during the late Middle Ages.” (Rein in Niggel 1998: 321) This implies that the autobiography, like every other phenomenon in the history of civilization, was something that developed gradually and did not appear instantly. Rein provided the proof

that some of the basic roots of the modern autobiography can be found in the writings of town citizens (1998: 323).

Referring to Meuseler again it must be said that he as an author was aware of the historical dimension of his work with the chronicle.

Anno 1631. [...] This summer many annoying things have happened which I have not written down partly because of my negligence and partly because of their insignificance. May God in heaven give us something good, so that one could report with joy about things that would serve our descendants (Meuseler in Nottbeck 212).⁶

Meuseler postulates here that both writing and non-writing are significant. His classification of the issues in categories regarding their worth reveals that he is aware of the most powerful instrument of every chronicler – the deliberate choice of which events to record. There are two key tools in structuring a diary and in attributing the meaning which is favoured by the author: the choice of which issues to relate and how extensively they should be treated. In the case of our diary it can be said that Meuseler largely adheres to his task of writing primarily about daily events in the Great Guild, but there are numerous exceptions. These more general issues Meuseler felt necessary to consider could sometimes involve extensive and lengthy projects within the town, or in some cases even global news.

Meuseler usually treats his daily entries as one unit. A day in the diary corresponds to the “scene” in a drama or the “chapter” in a book (see Brunner 1997: 329). But there are also entries in which Meuseler replaces the exact date in the beginning of the entry with one whole season or even a year. We can trace different motivations for this kind of compression. On the one hand these entries describe certain processes in the town which the author wanted to present once they had come to completion. “Anno 1618. This summer a solid pillar was raised in the town wall near the Karrisporte to support the damaged wall.” (186) On the other hand Meuseler compresses depicted information when he refers to certain political processes which formed the framework conditions for the life in his hometown. “Anno 1618. Thank God this autumn a 2-year ceasefire between the Swedish state and Polish crown was signed.” (186) As can be seen here, the actions of the Swedish royal house may be one reason why the author describes issues beyond the immediate concerns of the Great Guild. The relevance of reporting the latest news from a wider political

⁶ The original text in Low German is added only in the case of verses.

arena was of course due to the Swedish king being the ruler over the country. But secondly it is indisputable that the described events, agreements and battles concerning the Swedish crown also had a significant impact on the daily life in Tallinn, for example in the form of additional taxes. The family matters of the Swedish king always had the potential of challenging the agreements between the town and the rulers and therefore of having a strong impact on the inhabitants:

Anno 1622, on the 3rd of January His Royal Highness, as well as his brother Carl Philipp, reached the town Weißenstein [...] On the next day, on the 5th, His R. H. and His brother as well as several soldiers left for Narva and then returned to Sweden via Russia. Carl Philipp, however, fell ill in Narva and eventually passed away there on the 25th of January. May God be merciful to his soul. (201)

The younger brother of Gustav II, the King of Sweden, Adolf Carl (Karl) Philipp (Philip) (1601–1621)⁷ was a puppet in the political games between Russian and Swedish royal houses⁸. Hence one reason for mentioning Karl Philipp was his royal birth. The other reason might have been an earlier important connection of Karl Philipp's biography with Tallinn – this member of the royal family was actually born in Tallinn.⁹

One more narrative technique we have to focus on is the specific use of personal pronouns. Meuseler often adopts the first person plural when referring to the community in the brotherhood of the Great Guild or to the citizens of the town as a whole: “On the 24th [of January in 1626] our gentlemen [...] went to him [the king] into the palace and congratulated him [...]. May God give us something good as a result.” (205) But in speaking about the actions or decisions made in the town, the “we”-form is not always used. When the author disagrees with the City Council or his fellow Guild aldermen, he refers to the decision makers as “they/ them”. One example can be found where Meuseler describes the election of the members for the City Council on the 10th of December in 1620. Two men who actually came from Tartu and Narva, not from Tallinn, were elected on that day: “Now they have elected people from Dorpat [Tartu] and Narva [...] as if there were no good men in Reval [Tallinn]” (197). On the 6th of December in 1641, Meuseler

⁷ The dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar, Meuseler uses old calendar.

⁸ The Swedish officer Pontus de la Gardie had the idea of making him the czar of Russia, because Sweden had helped Russia in its war against Poland. (Nottbeck/Neumann 1904: 162)

⁹ (See Kenkmaa s.a.: 2; 8 verso).

writes: "This year there were unfortunately a number of unpleasant and discordant incidents which happened between the honoured members of the City Council and the respectable community which was for us, the aldermen, a source of great trouble and annoyance." (216) In these examples the author sees himself primarily as an alderman ("we aldermen") and secondly just as a citizen of the town. According to Erika and Ernst von Borries in the Early Modern era it became more and more common for the residents of German towns to define themselves primarily by their profession (Borries 1991: 347). In Meuseler's text the same phenomenon can be noted.

Although the use of first person plural and the switch between different group identities as described above is meaningful, it is evident that most attention should be paid to these parts of text where the author uses first person singular – the pronoun "I". First it can be said that the pronoun "I" is used by Meuseler in different contexts. On some occasions "I" refers to certain simple actions the writer had undertaken in his position as an alderman: "Then I stood up, went to the table and sat down with the others [...]" (212).

But certainly the most plausible reason for the author to use the first person singular is to give voice to his own judgement. After reporting certain events or issues in a neutral way Meuseler sometimes expresses his feelings, fears or even contempt in his notes: "The burgomaster Berend van Garten has rented the manor Johannishof for himself resulting in large pecuniary loss for the town and a high profit for himself. I fear that his heirs will not benefit from this. May God save me from the poor house." (186) In this case Meuseler refers to a scandal in the town and the reader can understand very clearly that Meuseler disapproves of corrupt behavior of the burgomaster. Using "I" gives the statement a stronger impact; the hint about the heirs can even be interpreted as a threat – the action would not remain unpunished. In similar cases of discontent, Meuseler turns to God: "God may prevent us from such a disaster in the future." (192) or "God help him. Only he himself is to blame. God forgive him." (189)

In the notes concerning the year 1621 we find a description of an argument in which Meuseler himself was involved. Hans Knieper, a Guild brother, insulted and physically attacked him. We do not know the reason for the conflict because some pages are missing. However, the description of this serious argument is extant. Knieper's accusations are presented in the form of reported speech:

September 1621. [...] He did not just scold me, but rather attacked me even more seriously and said he would like to see the day when I and my whole family would eventually be recognized as thieves and dishonest people. He even threatened me with death; he said he would eventually shoot or stab me and that I would die in his presence. (199)

As reported by Meuseler, the alderman Heinrich Staal tried to calm Knieper down, but he responded that Staal and Meuseler have no right to tell him anything since they were not yet recognized as aldermen. To achieve a more dramatic effect, Meuseler now switches to direct speech: "Thereupon the alderman Heinrich Staal who was sitting among us, began to talk: Hans Knieper, I have always known you as a reasonable man; now I see something different [...]" (199). Knieper's answer is also presented in direct speech: "You have been called dishonest by the City Council at least 10 times!" (200). After that Knieper was threatened with imprisonment. He then calls out: "If I am locked up in the cellar, you, Meuseler, should come with me." (200) After one day in the cellar, Knieper was released. Meuseler comments on it: "Staal gave him freedom with a handshake, against my will and agreement." (200) This affair ended with a fine, although according to the statute of the Guild, Knieper should have been excluded from the Guild because he had offended the aldermen. Meuseler sees himself clearly as a victim and declares his disapproval of the decision of the Guild. He ends the description of the affair with this statement: "He did not receive enough [punishment]." (201)

This controversy lasted over several weeks; in addition to the actual argument there was an attempt at reconciliation on the next day. After that, the argument was discussed during six meetings of the Guild in October. The entries dealing with the argument are very emotional and show Meuseler's concern. It can be seen here that the aim of the diary is similar to later autobiographical writings, which give information about certain issues in their logical order and the author comments on them in the way he feels to be necessary. Adolf Rein states: "Once the desire to write about one's life had first happened, it consequently led to attempts to report the story of one's life in a coherent manner." (Rein 1998: 335)

In order to make the audience receptive, Meuseler also uses rhetorical devices. For example the synecdoche in the following sentence increases intensity of the emotion in the entry: "After that, *the Pole* invaded the country and began to burn, to murder and to slaughter immediately" (182). Furthermore, Meuseler uses adjectives in his diary which invite the listener to become

emotionally involved. Characterizations like “outrageous” (214) or “cheeky and stubborn” (188) make clear what the author thinks about the described person. Meuseler’s vivid way of relating his story can also be seen in the entries about the above-mentioned argument. He notes the punches, the swollen eyes, the action of dragging by the collar and the interference from others. (191, 200)

By using verses and proverbs Meuseler makes the formal text seem more like literature. Meuseler illustrates a case of corruption by a burgomaster with amusing verses:

Like it is said in a proverb
If the burgomaster pours wine
And the butchers sit in City Council
And the baker slices the bread himself,
Poor people suffer greatly. (186).¹⁰

In the given case the burgomaster had rented a tavern for himself for two years on very good terms.

Meuseler also uses verses to conclude the first diary. In April 1621 Meuseler was finally recognized as an alderman by the City Council. The author expresses his good wishes and recommendations in the form of rhymes.¹¹ The verses offer no new information; they are used merely to accentuate and underline certain issues.

Compared to letters (see Saagpak 2009: 59) or casual poetry of that time in Meuseler’s text the neutral way of referring to the Swedish king or the members of the royal family can also be seen as a specific feature of his text. When speaking about the king the author mostly uses just “Herr”/ “Sir” (192) instead of the conventional long titles. The unconventional use of titles shows us on the one hand that the text was not meant to be read by officials of the state. On the other hand we see that the use of titles was not something

¹⁰ Original: „[...] als men Jm Sprichworde redet, dar der Burgemeister schenket win: vndt de flescher: midt Jm Rade sin, vndt der backer snit suleust dat brodt, dar lit de arnot grote Nodt [...]”. Meuseler 1610–1621: Bl. 8.

¹¹ Original: woll thom olderman: erwelet wirt/ der tr? gott vndt sij vnuorferet/ vorwalte dat amt: mit woll bedacht/ sin eigen Nütt: se niechten acht/ der gemeine beste: betrachte geme/ vndt halde den schrag: Jn sinen werden/ strafe balt dar nach: wat sich gebüret/ uf dat der stant: nicht werde vnehret/ sehe nicht as frundtschap: oder hoeheit/ besundern do recht: ohne vnderscheit/ kese neumn thom amt, der es nicht is wert/ dar mit de gilde: nicht werde vnehret/ brueke oek Jn allen: bescheidenheit/ de gemeine tho erholden Jn Enieheit/ sij sorgfoldieg tho Jeder zitt/ dat he nicht gade frieheit qwitt/ sunst wert he krigen: vor sin lhoen/ vngunst nasage: spott vndt hon. Meuseler 1610–1621: 30 verso.

thoroughly common; it can be assumed that the formal use of titles was not ordinary in everyday speech. And it also refers to the fact that Meuseler was aware of the difference between the genres *letter* and *diary* and is therefore a sign of the author being reflective about his writing.

Conclusions

It can be stated that the diary of Caspar Meuseler is one of the oldest self-reflecting writings found in Tallinn. We see that Meuseler is an attentive observer of his environment and that he attaches great importance to communicating his personal opinions about the issues which he discusses. The intention of the author is to present the past as something which has been emotionally experienced rather than just noticed. Therefore it can be concluded that the diaries of Caspar Meuseler deserve to be considered as a part of the literary activities in Tallinn and are worthy to be included in Klöker's term "literary life of Tallinn" in the baroque era.

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