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A Merchant's Life in the Seventeenth Century

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Preface

I have known Matheus Miller for more than a decade. His memoir came into my hands in 1987, when I explored the City Archive of Augsburg as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Its entry in the register of the *Evangelisches Wesensarchiv*, a collection devoted to the history of the city's Lutheran community, read simply 'Miller Tagebuch'. Who or what was Miller? A document with such a title normally belonged in a private family archive or in the collections of a library. No less importantly, what was a 'Tagebuch'? Translated, the word usually meant 'diary'. Students of early modern Europe know, however, that the genre did not exist then, as it exists today. Literate individuals chronicled their daily experiences but larded their recollections with records of events in a wider world or with reflections on a world unseen. The term can also refer to a merchant's journal, that is, an account of daily transactions. In either case, the 'Miller Tagebuch' promised to be interesting.

The document was not what I expected. It was obviously no merchant's account book. Construction and size argued against its use as a permanent record of commercial activity. It was apparently an inexpensive notebook, probably purchased ready-made. Stitched into a heavy, unadorned paper cover, its pages were of rather cheap rag paper cut to a convenient size, roughly 21 × 16 centimeters, slightly larger than our own notepaper today. It contained 100 pages, some 85 of which were over-written in a tight, difficult script made even less legible by the use of numerous abbreviations.

Nor were its contents easily categorized. The title page contained a clear statement of purpose, one that reflected an autobiographical motivation.¹

In this little book are written down all manner of things concerning me, Matheus Miller of Augsburg. From my birth onward, so long as God gives me life and grace to continue writing, is [my life] with few words recorded to that end that my own may find it after God grants me the grace to leave them.

Accordingly, I could expect to find here the milestones of a life lived three centuries ago, signposts carefully selected to be of interest and use to the author's descendants. What followed, however, was no

ordinary diary. In its structure, Matheus's memoir bore striking resemblance to philosophical discussions of the good life. A lengthy narrative of his youth, written in retrospect, preceded three discrete collections of episodes from his adult life, each devoted to a separate theme, organized chronologically but recorded simultaneously, like concurrent entries in a merchant's account. He listed family matters first, public offices second, and social connections third. In its arrangement of events in time, the memoir obscured its own point of origin. I could determine neither when Matheus had written it, whether over a period of some 40 years or at one point late in his life, nor how distant he was, chronologically and psychologically, from his youthful self. The accuracy, or better, the specificity, of detail along with the episodic character of its structure suggested events recorded periodically, but the consistency of his written voice seemed to indicate one sustained, continuous effort at writing. All factors signified an intention much more complex than that usually associated with a diary, a purpose in writing at once historical, didactic and apologetic.

It has taken me nearly ten years to reach some kind of conclusion about Matheus and his memoir. In that time, many things intervened. Other aspects of early modern Europe seized my attention. And the present made demands of its own. Yet, the mystery, as I saw it, of the man and the document might not have been solved more speedily for all that. It took time to locate other traces of Matheus's life. He was an important figure in Augsburg, a wealthy merchant and a devout Lutheran, who left surprisingly few public records of his existence. It took time to grasp his sense of family, office, friendship and faith. Matheus's own, sometimes idiosyncratic, notions were implicit in his retelling of events but never explicitly abstracted and articulated. And it took time to realize that he offered both a window on the seventeenth century and a mirror for our interpretations of it.

In that time, many friends have shared my interest and encouraged my research. Among them I must list two organizations. The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation underwrote my introduction to Augsburg and to Matheus, and the University of Pennsylvania provided time and support to pursue the acquaintance. Jerry Drew, Rolf Kiessling, Philip Kintner, Eric Olsen, Leonard Rosenband, James Saporito, Adam Shear, Amy Smith, Anthea Waleson, Lee Wandel, and Michele Zelinsky generously discussed my ideas and read the manuscript. Rab Houston, Ed Muir, and the late Bob Scribner, editors of Macmillan's *Early Modern History: Society and Culture* series, greatly improved the book with their questions and suggestions. Fine scholars and discerning critics

all, they will find themselves at various points in my understanding of Matheus. For all their help I thank them even as I reserve to myself all responsibility for the final interpretations.

As has always been the case, my family supported my efforts to make sense of Matheus and his memoir. He became an unseen but accepted presence in our household. This book is for Michele, therefore, whose patience, humor and intelligence extended my own and made this study possible.

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