

Andreas Rutz, Stefan Elit, Stephan Kraft

Egodocumenten

A virtual conversation with Rudolf M. Dekker

Editor's note

The following text is the result of an experiment. Instead of conducting a regular face-to-face interview with Rudolf Dekker, the editors of this issue wanted to test the possibilities of e-mail as a modern means of (scientific) communication. The idea was not to ask a predefined set of questions, but to engage into a lively discussion on the subject. One of the outcomes of this procedure is that the interviewers, two literary critics and a historian, comment on some of the topics themselves. Another is that the statements in general are much longer than one would expect from 'normal' interviews. This 'virtual conversation' was held in June and July 2002 over a period of six weeks. It was moderated by Andreas Rutz who also revised and shortened the texts.



Biographical note:

Rudolf Dekker was born in Amsterdam in 1951. He studied history at the University of Amsterdam and wrote a dissertation on riots and revolts in Holland in the 17th and 18th centuries. Since 1981 he teaches at the Faculty of History and Art of the Erasmus University Rotterdam. In 1998 he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. He has published on cross-dressing women (with

Lotte van de Pol), the history of humour and jokes, childhood memories and other subjects. His main research interest is the development of autobiographical writing in its social context. Together with Arianne Baggerman he is currently writing a book about enlightenment and revolution in the late 18th century based upon experiences recorded in a child's diary. <<http://www.fhk.eur.nl/personal/r.dekker>>

Rutz: June 2, 2002, 16:00

First of all, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you, Rudolf, for your kind willingness to participate in this virtual conversation on your work and the broad field of egodocuments!

Because of your methodological reflections and the cataloguing projects for early modern Dutch 'egodocumenten' you have been directing at the Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, your name is closely connected to the fairly new approach towards autobiographies, self-testimonies and egodocuments in the historical sciences. Could

you outline how you got interested in the study of these texts and tell us a little about the state of research at that time?

Dekker: June 4, 2002, 23:17

The first time I encountered egodocuments as a historian was during research for my dissertation on riots and revolts in Holland in the 17th and 18th centuries. Taking the work of social historians like George Rude as an example, I started using archival sources, mainly judicial records. But I also started reading some contemporary diaries and found out, to my surprise, that they not only give a lot of additional information, but in several cases tell totally different stories. This made me aware of the usefulness of egodocuments, but also of how unreliable official sources often can be - not only in early modern times, but also today.

When I started working in Rotterdam in 1981, a plan was developed that each colleague should write a short introduction to a certain type of source. I chose egodocuments, but never wrote the introduction. Instead I began working on an inventory of Dutch egodocuments. With two other historians, Yvonne Scherf and Ruud Lindeman, I visited all archives and libraries in the Netherlands and also some museums with manuscript collections. It took a bit more than four years, but the project was finished, the inventories were published, and they are now available on the internet: <http://www.egodocument.net/>.

Not all Dutch historians were enthusiastic about our project at that time, though. There were doubts about the usefulness of egodocuments and also doubts as to whether we would really find such texts. However, many others supported us and we had a great advantage in Holland: the heritage of Jacques Presser who had invented the word 'egodocument'. We therefore could connect to a little stream within Dutch historiography.

It would be nice to know if the three of you have favourite diarists or autobiographers - probably Goethe in the case of Stefan Elit!

Kraft: June 7, 2002, 8:15

The autobiography which lately impressed me most was Ruth Klüger's "weiter leben" in which she recounts her life as a Jew in Nazi-Germany. What really makes the book special, in my opinion, is that she reflects a lot on the problems, possibilities, and also the pitfalls of memory. One can participate in the process of her reconstructing a painful past, with all its taboos and dark spots, but is never confronted only with history 'as it really was'. Instead Klüger always keeps in mind that everything could have been completely different from what she remembers, hopes or fears today, many decades later. You can learn a lot from this book, particularly on the questionable reliability of egodocuments, even those written by persons who strive for sincerity.

Elit: June 7, 2002, 11:26

I would also like to mention an interesting example of rather recent autobiography: "Geschichte eines Deutschen. Die Erinnerungen 1914-1933", most probably written in 1939 by the great journalist Sebastian Haffner in his English exile. Haffner explicitly

wanted to present his own life during the Weimar and the beginning Nazi era as more or less typical for a German 'Bildungsbürger' of the time. He tried, thereby, to show how it was possible that the German people almost willingly got caught, or at least functionalized, by the Nazis. In my opinion, Haffner in 1939 wrote sort of a 'confessio' - with a political intention, though: He wanted to blame himself (thus setting an example for other Germans) for not having been alert enough, even though he could have known better.

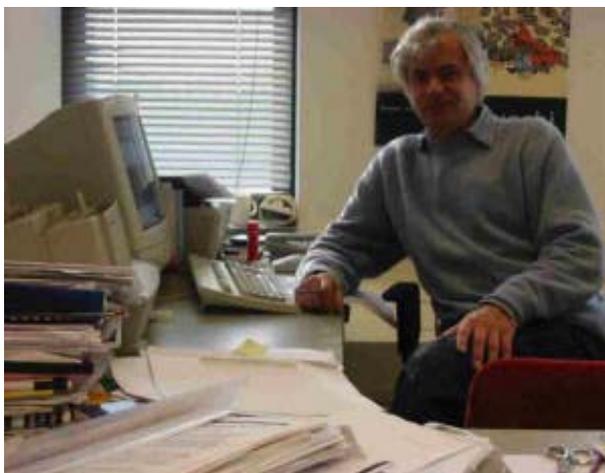
Rutz: June 7, 2002, 15:45

Well, I have to admit that I can't really name 'my favourite egodocument'. For my dissertation on female religious orders and their involvement in public education in early modern times, I am studying, among other sources, the few existing autobiographies of (French) Ursuline nuns to get a closer look at their religious mentalities and motivations for teaching little girls. As Rudolf Dekker has said, egodocuments tell different stories, and, especially since male writing and thinking dominate archival tradition, we rely on egodocuments to get an insight into the thinking of the 'other sex'.

Allow me to elaborate on another point here: Looking at some of the latest editions of egodocuments, we observe an obvious concentration on texts written by members of the lower strata of society, such as artisans, peasants, soldiers, etc. This is, of course, a logical consequence of current trends in historical research. What we should turn to, in addition, are egodocuments of the higher classes and of the 'movers and shakers'. Of course, a lot of the autobiographies and memoirs of kings and regents, military leaders and entrepreneurs are well known and have been analyzed abundantly by scholars of political and military history. There are, however, many questions to be asked when we start reading these texts as egodocuments and sources for the history of mentality and/or historical anthropology.

Maybe we can come back to this later when we'll talk about future projects and possibilities in our field. For the moment, I'm very interested in hearing Rudolf Dekker on the heritage of Jacques Presser!

Dekker: June 10, 2002, 9:45



became aware of her book because Florence Koorn, my wife, took part in a conference on women's autobiographies organized by Magdalene Heuser in Bad Homburg. Ruth Klüger gave a talk on her book there. [1] Talking with 'real' autobiographers should be encouraged anyway. They should be invited to conferences, too, as historians have a tendency toward armchair scholarship (at least, I have).

Of the autobiographers mentioned I have read Ruth Klüger (indeed impressive). I

My encounters with autobiographers have been scarce so far. The first was with our next-door neighbour in Amsterdam, where I grew up, called 'Pistolen Paul'. He was the self-styled king of the Amsterdam underworld before crime became big business there. He had his autobiography written by a journalist, Martin van Amerongen, and gave us a signed copy with additional photos stuck in. In a way it was an eye-opener to see the difference between this autobiographical text and the daily life of this quiet and probably rather harmless man.

My discovery of the genre fits the pattern mentioned by Andreas Rutz. The autobiography of Pistolen Paul is exemplary for the interest of historians for texts written by authors outside the mainstream of history, such as lower classes, marginal figures, women, slaves, ethnic minorities, etc. Among the books on these people there are fascinating studies. Perhaps it is indeed time to turn to the elite again, especially since the 16th century court circles and the military were one of the places where the genre developed. I am currently working on a study based on the diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr., the secretary of the stadholder-king Willem III, Prince of Orange, which gives a fascinating insight in court life in London and The Hague in the late 17th century. I treat such upper-class texts in the same way as those written by members of the lower strata of society: that is from an anthropological viewpoint, and not in the classical way of using them as 'sources'.

At the moment there is a growing tendency among historians to write their own autobiographies, 'ego-histoire' as it is called in France. The idea is that, if you know something about the historian's biography and personality, you might understand his/her work a lot better. This is a very unpostmodernist view, but very useful! The last example of that genre which I read was Peter Gay's "My German question".

As promised, I will give you some more information on Jacques Presser. It is taken from an article which has just appeared in the *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, and it is one of the advantages of e-publishing that I can simply lift it from there and include it in this interview as a [hyperlink](#).

I should add that I never really met Presser. I went to the school in Amsterdam where he was a teacher, but of course he had left long before, and he had just resigned as a professor before I started my studies. I only saw him once when I, coincidentally, was a gatecrasher at a party at the Historisch Seminarium - a party kept more or less secret at the time Amsterdam was having its wave of student revolts. Professors drinking sherry and smoking cigars in the library would not be welcomed very much by most of the students. Presser's personal notes are now at the University Library Amsterdam. I have to admit that I have never seen them. This is something I plan to do tomorrow.

Rutz: June 10, 2002, 16:00

In Germany Presser's name and the Dutch term 'egodocumenten' are mainly known because of your Rotterdam inventory project and the papers which stem from this work.

By the time the two inventories were published in the early 1990s, the historical sciences had changed a lot compared to those of Presser's times, though: The new field of historical anthropology was well established among American and European historians and these scholars were eager to work with this type of historical record.

Interestingly, the meaning of the term 'egodocumenten' was changed when it was 'translated' into other languages, especially into German. Winfried Schulze adapted the Dutch term and came up with a new definition for an enlarged group of sources which he called 'Ego-Dokumente'. What do you think of Schulze's broad definition of egodocuments that not only includes autobiographies, memoirs, journals, and letters, but also judicial, administrative, and economical documents that might contain autobiographical information? Do you think that this enlarged definition is useful for the methodological discussion and usable in practice? Did it have an impact on your work?

Dekker: June 17, 2002, 10:52

I was an eye-witness to the introduction of the term 'Ego-Dokument' in Germany. The conference in Bad Homburg that Winfried Schulze had organized on the subject was indeed very stimulating. Nevertheless, the broad definition that Schulze gave to the word egodocument was something of a surprise to me. I use the word, like Presser did, as a broad umbrella term for diaries, autobiographies, personal letters, and personal travel journals. All of these are, more or less, private writing. Of course, many more texts can have an autobiographical character, and the line is sometimes difficult to draw. There is, however, a clear distinction when it comes to novels and archival or official texts.

I know from experience that judicial interrogations often can be read like autobiographies. They start with the same sentences about place and time of birth, parents, etc. Including all these types of texts broadens the concept of 'egodocument', but, in so doing, the term loses much of its focus. For that reason, as far as I know, the word has not been widely accepted in Germany. I agree with the criticism of Benigna von Krusenstjern who prefers the German 'Selbstzeugnisse'. This term does indeed cover much the same ground.

In England, the word is now used more and more often, although without comparable discussion. Peter Burke was probably the first British historian to adopt it. Mary Lindemann introduced the term in her article on the sources of social history in the "Encyclopaedia of European Social History" published recently. She writes that egodocuments contribute to historical knowledge "by endowing ordinary lives with agency, dignity, and texture". And she continues: "Egodocuments have demonstrated how the rigid categories constructed by historians preoccupied with studying large groups and big structures might be less confining in practice". [2] I agree, of course, and it is nice to see that the word can be useful outside Holland.

In my last e-mail I wrote that I would take a look at Presser's notes, but that turned out to be more difficult than I expected. The librarian of the Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam e-mailed me that I would have to obtain permission from the family. In general, Dutchmen are very anxious about their privacy, at least with respect to family papers. Often they are not deposited in public archives or their access is

restricted. Since we are now cataloguing Dutch egodocuments up to 1914 we encounter many of these problems.

To give an example: In our series 'Egodocumenten', we published in 1998 the diary of Jacob David Mees, written when he was a student in Leiden in 1872-1874. The text was edited by Thimo de Nijs, who had contact with the family and presented them the first copy of the book at an official meeting. After reading it, some members of the family thought that it went too far (Mees once visited some popular cafés in Rotterdam). As the author makes a vague remark at some place in the diary about destroying it after his death, the family claimed that the whole edition should be destroyed. Their private archive was immediately closed to the public.

Kraft: June 18, 2002, 13:49

After having discussed the term 'egodocument' and its evolution, I would now like to turn to the current and future aims of egodocument research and the problems implied.

While organizing the conference 'Autobiographie - Selbstzeugnis - Egodokument. Zur Wahrnehmung und Darstellung des Ich in der Frühen Neuzeit' in Bonn in December 2001, we came to the conclusion that in historical research egodocuments are often used as only one source among others in order to study a great variety of subjects. Of course, one cannot possibly criticize that historians use the most extensive data available to answer their questions. There is, however, the risk that the relatively young field of egodocument research might overlook the necessity of methodological (self-)reflection by a precipitate and unhampered 'utilization' of these sources.

This consideration might be due to my literary critics' focus. In this perspective questions of how a text is designed and how it functions are much more important than the attempt to utilize it for problems beyond the text itself and its structure. In this regard it is problematic to use an egodocument as a source for whatever question (in German you would call this 'Zweckentfremdung'), especially before not having discussed the specific discourses of these texts in much more detail than to my knowledge has yet happened.

During the discussions at our conference it became quite clear that there is still a certain need for this kind of self-reflection. Even though historians and literary critics agreed that they were mainly discussing egodocuments as egodocuments, differences appeared already when dealing with the question of what kind of 'ego' or 'self' we might or want to discover in our texts. Are we mainly heading for a history of the discourse of the self, or are we also looking for the specific individuals who express themselves in the texts we are talking about? As you know, literary critics have quite some problems with the term 'individual'. Especially the postmodernist theory of the last two or three decades has pointed out that the aim for a more or less unfeigned glimpse of the 'self' in any text is rather problematic.

At the conference, two historians described how they set out to seek the historical individual in the egodocuments they worked on. Yet, they barely found more individuality than some biographical data. Should we agree with their rejection of the concept 'egodocument', at least for their sources, or did they just not ask the right questions? In my opinion, it will nearly always be disappointing to search an

egodocument for a distinct and accomplished self that might hide under the thick layers of discourse. If one is not satisfied with simply reconstructing this discourse and does not want to give up the idea of finding an 'individual' he should - rather than trying to find it in the centre of his text - look for it from the margins, in the fractions of discourse, and the unexpected details and shifts. Starting from there one might not be able to reconstruct the historical self, but its presence surely leaves behind more or less visible traces in the discourse that it is embracing.

Dekker: June 24, 2002, 9:09



In his last e-mail Stephan Kraft addressed some of the questions that historians have been discussing intensively during the last years without reaching much of a consensus. First of all, I think you rightly stress that historians use egodocuments for reasons that differ much from the intentions of their authors ('Zweckentfremdung' as you put it). The matter is even more complicated, though.

Traditionally historians have believed that the intention of the authors of egodocuments was mainly to express their individuality. It has now become clear that the vast majority of autobiographies was written for the authors' descendants and intended to pass on family traditions and values to later generations (quite the opposite of individualism). On the other hand, 'Zweckentfremdung' is not a new phenomenon. Historians using, for instance, judicial records do exactly the same, hence encountering similar problems. They do not read those papers as if they were 16th-century judges. And there are even greater discrepancies, for example when historians use tax registers mentioning the start of vintage in France as a source for the history of climate.

In my opinion, it is essential to study both content and form, and to study them with a historical perspective. I became aware of the need for this approach while writing a chapter of my book on childhood and autobiographical writing. Historians have often wondered why diarists wrote so little about the death of children before roughly 1800. Part of the answer is that the diary did not change into a more literary form with more room for the expression of emotions until the 19th century. Prior to that time, emotions caused by the death of a child were more easily expressed in funerary poetry, a genre that died out in the 19th century. To separate form and content is, in other words, impossible.

Indeed, the idea exists that hidden in an egodocument there is the holy grail of individuality. In Roy Pascal's still frequently cited book "Design and Truth in Autobiography" from 1960 you find sentences such as: "True autobiography can be written only by men and women pledged to their innermost selves", "The value of an autobiography depends ultimately on the quality of the writer", and "Obviously, every autobiographer must leave out the humdrum details of everyday life". Many historians today are reading such text just for those humdrum details!

There is also the question of truth in egodocuments. I did encounter this problem, even before I really became interested in the genre while writing my book on female cross-dressing in early modern Europe with Lotte van de Pol. One 'source' we used was the autobiography of a female soldier, Maria van Antwerpen. She served in the army for years until she was discovered in 1751. The same year her autobiography was published, ghost-written by Franciscus Lievens Kersteman, for whom this was the first of many popular novels and other books. A historian of literature, Hanna Stouten, wrote an extensive review of our book. She focused on this case and claimed that we never should have used this novel because, even if Maria had existed at all, this 'autobiography' was probably purely fictional. We reacted by digging into the archives again and preparing a text edition of this autobiography.

We found out more about Maria van Antwerpen and Franciscus Kersteman than we could have ever hoped for. First of all we learned that Kersteman not only served in the army at the same time as Maria, but was also imprisoned in the same prison at the same time. It was, therefore, very likely that the two did indeed know each other. Second, we learned that a few years after having been found guilty and sentenced to a long banishment in 1751, Maria changed sex again, entered the army, and was discovered and sentenced for a second time in 1769. From the records of this trial, we found five extensive interrogations in the archives. Here she tells a life story which is close to the one told in her ghost-written autobiography. Also many of the ideas, reasons, and feelings she mentioned in the book of 1751 returned during the interrogations of 1769. In our edition of her autobiography we added the interrogations so that the readers can compare the different texts.

The links between fiction and non-fiction are subtle. Historians of literature should not maintain that fiction is never about reality, and historians should not claim that their archival sources are the truth and nothing but the truth, if only because Maria lied both in the autobiography and during the interrogations about her date of birth.

An interesting procedure of writing, showing how complex the relationship between fiction and non-fiction can be, is the transformation of an egodocument into fictional literature. In Holland a few years ago a stir was caused by the publication of a novel in five volumes in which the author had simply retold his diary in the third person. Real people were depicted very recognizably, especially to historians like myself, because the author, J. J. Voskuil, was a prominent scholar of Dutch folklore and department-head at an institute of the Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen. I know several of the men and women who figure in this 'novel'. They are often described in a sarcastic way, in embarrassing situations, and shown at their worst. I only met Voskuil once at a conference, and even though he did indeed write about this conference, I am not mentioned in the book. This is fortunate, as our conversation was something of a cross talk.

I am not planning to do the same, so do not worry about future meetings. However, Voskuil said the same to friends and colleagues who suspected that he was writing a diary...

Rutz: June 25, 2002, 18:44

Several complex issues have been mentioned in the last statements that I would like to discuss with you a little more in depth:

1. Individuality in egodocuments

The different terms we use for sources containing autobiographical or personal information, such as egodocument, self-testimony and autobiography focus on the 'self', the historical individual, the historical 'I' who has written a text. As Stephan Kraft has pointed out, this historical individual can be spotted only very rarely in our texts. Therefore the question is: What kind of individuality do we actually hope to find in egodocuments? Is it 'subjective' information on personal things like the body, emotions, feelings, and thoughts or is it 'objective' information on the collective mentalities of the times concerning the individual, the personal sphere, etc.? To make things short: Where is the ego in early modern egodocuments?

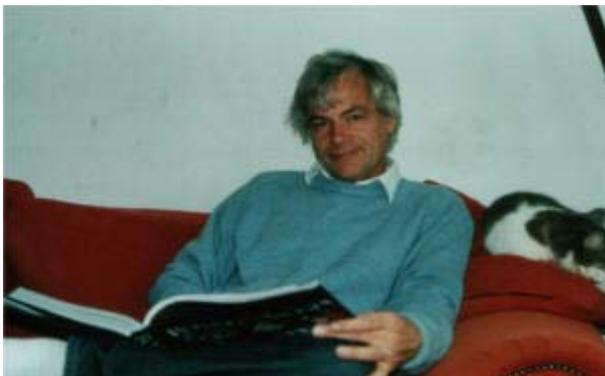
2. Content and form in egodocuments

The variety of egodocuments is tremendous. There are short notes of a few lines that have been written down spontaneously within a few minutes and books of many, many pages that have taken years to compose. All can be subsumed under the term egodocument. These differences in form surely influence and determine the content of egodocuments and vice versa. Don't we have to find specific hermeneutic approaches to each one of these textual forms in order to differentiate individual style, rhetoric or literary pattern and common discourse? If so, how useful is a label like egodocument for this variety of texts when you think beyond cataloguing projects?

3. Truth and subjectivity in egodocuments

Research on egodocuments is booming because historians are getting more and more interested in the perceptions and experiences of individual human beings and the groups they represent. Thus, the focus has shifted to subjective perspectives on historical events, social changes, etc. How important then are truth (Wahrheit) and sincerity (Wahrhaftigkeit) in egodocuments? Aren't 'wrong' statements in egodocuments always psychologically true as Alessandro Portelli has stated for oral histories? And what does this mean for the interpretation of our sources, especially when you think of the fading borderline between fiction and non-fiction in our texts?

Dekker: July 1, 2002, 9:50



In his last e-mail Andreas Rutz conveniently split the complicated matter we discussed in our earlier e-mails into three. All three involve important theoretical issues, and again I can only answer with telling you something about my personal views and the way I deal with them.

My ideas on the question of individuality, to begin with, depend on which text I am reading. After reading the diary of Samuel Pepys, I somehow really have the idea that I know this man a bit. Much more so in the case of my friend, I am tempted to say, Constantijn Huygens Jr. Maybe I know them better than living friends, none of whom has ever given me his diary to read! Even if Pepys and Huygens have only shown some aspects of their selves in their diaries, the same is true for persons still alive. I am never disappointed reading an egodocument, simply because I do not believe that selves flow from these sources like water from the tap. For the same

reason, though, I can understand that literary critics do not care for the type of information I hope to find there.

I have the same relaxed approach concerning the question as to whether the word egodocument is useful beyond cataloguing texts. When you are cataloguing texts you are talking about texts. When you are talking, you are thinking. If people make use of a word, its existence is obviously helpful. Its use is the very proof of its usefulness.

Concerning the question of truth in egodocuments, it is interesting for a historian to find out what people in the past thought was true (the sun moving around the earth, for example). Nevertheless, it might be a good idea to keep in mind that it is the earth that revolves around the sun. Truth and lies in egodocuments should at least be studied in a subtle way. There are as many ways to tell lies, as there are to tell the truth. For a long time, it has been a widespread belief among historians that autobiographers (even if they try to be sincere) make up most of their life stories. Today, however, it is more generally accepted, I think, that autobiographers only do so within narrow margins - expect for very exceptional cases.

This e-mail was delayed, I have to admit, for various reasons. One of them is the continuing research for the book on Otto van Eck's diary which I am now finishing with Arianne Baggerman. Last week we visited a descendant of Otto's sister born in 1786. Visiting the old country-house of this gentleman, who is now 91 years old, we saw some very old photos of Otto's sister hanging on the wall. We also heard some family stories about her character indicating that she must have been a rather difficult person. These stories shed a new light on the quarrels that Otto mentions in his diary. Here an oral family tradition did span the four centuries from the 18th to the 21st century. In a situation like this, I simply forget about the theoretical questions that historians are supposed to be permanently aware of. This was what Johan Huizinga called a 'historische sensatie'. The Belgian historians Jo Tollebeek and Tom Verschaffel wrote a book on that subject some years ago, called 'De vreugden van Houssaye'. The title refers to the French historian Henri Houssaye who around 1900 wrote enthusiastic pages about the greatest joys of historians that are making discoveries, gaining insight, and having contact with the material past. In our case this was all brought together.

Let me take the opportunity to fit in another [hyperlink](#) that stems from my work on childhood in egodocuments. It is a section on a Dutch author that shows, among other things, that the question of truth and falsehood or fantasy can be part of the historical research itself.

Elit: July 2, 2002, 15:09

It is really fascinating to hear about your 'historical sensations' and your lively interest in the matter! I guess what literary critics, with all their hermeneutical awareness, have to accept and perhaps can learn from historians is the broad and deep interest in the 'real reality' behind texts. Of course, I study literature because I am mainly interested in the worlds and 'realities' of fiction. But historical projects always remind me of the much wider, less 'exclusive' worlds and historical insights which can be discovered beyond. Furthermore, the historical quest involves a great number of texts

still more or less ignored by literary critics, because they do not have rather prominent authors or are not as brilliantly written as we would like them to be.

It was a great pleasure for me to attend the colloquy "Ego-Dokumente in transkultureller Perspektive" at the Freie Universität here in Berlin yesterday. Your colleague Arianne Baggerman presented her new project "Controlling Time and Shaping the Self. Education, Introspection, and Practices of Writing in the Netherlands 1750-1914" that deals with the development of autobiographical writing in connection with changes in the experience of time and introspection. In addition she outlined the Rotterdam inventory project of 19th and early 20th century Dutch egodocuments. It seems as if the huge number of diaries, agendas, and autobiographies stemming from the last two centuries form a great variety of texts that are to be collected now. It will still take a long time, though, to determine the specific (literary and historical) status and value of each one of them. This could and should certainly be a new field of co-operation for historians and literary critics!

Talking about advancements in egodocument research, I wonder what you expect when entering the world of 19th and 20th century texts now. Do you think that different or new challenges and implications will arise for egodocument research in general? In which directions should or could further research in the field lead?

Rutz: July 17, 2002, 15:25

Let me add some ideas I had when reading Stefan Elit's last e-mail: The discussion of egodocuments of the 19th and 20th century seems to be a logical continuation of the research that Rudolf Dekker and others have been conducting so far. Nevertheless, there are certainly many differences between modern and early modern egodocuments. To name only a few: the variety of textual forms is much larger (oral testimonies, TV and radio interviews, therapy protocols, opinion polls, etc.); 'individuality' is an important matter of discourse and thus reflected in modern egodocuments; we have lots of other sources and might not need egodocuments to show us unknown aspects of everyday life and mentalities.

Anyway, a discussion neglecting set and static periods is needed when talking about changing concepts of individuality and the evolution of adequate forms to reflect this individuality. Furthermore, researchers of early modern egodocuments might learn a lot from historians of modern or contemporary history and especially from oral historians who have dealt with questions of fact and fiction, truth and liability and so forth in oral testimonies for many decades.

Dekker: July 18, 2002, 9:40



Andreas, you are absolutely right! But let me go back to Stefan Elit's e-mail first. The question he asked in his last e-mail regarding looking into the future is of a difficult nature, especially for a historian. In what ways should research on egodocuments develop? Of course, it would also be interesting to think about the way this textual form will or can develop. Will interest in such texts among the general public grow further or will people at last be annoyed by all those men and women talking and writing about themselves? In any case, a Europe-wide research program aimed at tracing, describing, and also conserving egodocuments should have high priority, especially for those in private ownership. Other important expressions of culture, such as paintings or buildings, luckily receive a lot of attention. Written documents should, too. Another question is what methods historians should develop to study these texts in the future. I am not the kind of person who

likes to prescribe others how to do their research. Every historian should experiment. An example of a personal and original way to study egodocuments is the recent work of Philippe Lejeune, who has added to his edition of Lucile Desmoulins' "Journal 1788-1793" a personal epilogue in the form of a diary. His ongoing diary can be found on his website (<http://worldserver.oleane.com/autopact/>), while his most recent book "Cher écran" discusses the new development of internet-diaries. Maybe future egodocuments will only be found somewhere in the internet space.

A few days ago I was approached by a man who had developed an interesting idea. He wanted to ask people to write their autobiographies, seal them into blocks of granite, and make from those blocks a monument somewhat like the pyramids. Each autobiographer should contribute to the costs of this egodocument-monument. This would be, I guess, a considerable sum. I have no idea if this would be a success and a profitable business because it is too far away from my own interests. I personally identify more with those authors who write a few lines, put them in a bottle and throw them into the sea.

Rutz: July 19, 2002, 12:01

I really hope to find your message in a bottle one day, Rudolf! From my interview experience in oral history I know how hard it sometimes can be to get people talking. With you as an interviewee it was easy. We only had to give you some ideas and you would come up with wonderful stories that will certainly give our readers an idea of how fascinating research in egodocuments can be! Thank you very much!

Works by Rudolf M. Dekker mentioned in the text

- (with Lotte van de Pol): Daar was laatste een meisje loos. Nederlandse vrouwen als matrozen en soldaten, Baarn 1981.
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Dr. Rudolf Dekker:
Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
Faculteit der Historische en Kunstwetenschappen L4-012
Postbus 1738
NL 3000 DR Rotterdam
R.Dekker@fhk.eur.nl
<http://www.fhk.eur.nl/personal/r.dekker/>
<http://www.egodocument.net>

Empfohlene Zitierweise / recommended citation style:

Andreas Rutz, Stefan Elit, Stephan Kraft: Egodocumenten. A virtual conversation with Rudolf M. Dekker, in: **zeitenblicke** 1 (2002), Nr. 2 [20.12.2002], URL: <http://www.zeitenblicke.historicum.net/2002/02/dekker/index.html>

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