

Oral History as the History of Experience (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*) - An Interview with Alexander von Plato

Alexander Freund, University of Winnipeg

Alexander von Plato is an internationally recognized authority on oral history and one of Germany's leading oral historians. In this six-and-one-half hour interview, which I conducted with him on 8 April 2009 at his old family home in Germany, von Plato talks about his historical and political awakening during the 1960s and in opposition to his family. He describes the development of oral history in Germany and the specific approach to interviewing that German oral historians developed in projects in the late 1970s and 1980s. Von Plato was the founding editor of BIOS, Germany's oral history journal, and the founding director of the Institute for History and Biography at the distance university Hagen, Germany's largest oral history centre and archive. He was also instrumental in establishing and running the International Oral History Association. Retired since 2007, von Plato recently completed a major international oral history project on the experiences and memories of slave workers in Nazi-occupied Europe and continues to work on several oral history projects. To listen to the interview segments, download the mp3-files and play them on any media player. The article also contains a list of Alexander v. Plato's publications.

The way to my interview with Alexander von Plato, one of Germany's most influential and productive oral historians, took me from Berlin to a hamlet some 120 kilometers westbound. The Intercity that ran from the German capital to Stendal had not been much maintained since the early 1990s and I was glad to get off the crowded train after less than an hour. It was one of spring's first warmer days, so the 10-minute wait for the Regional Express train to Salzwedel at the sleepy station near the former "German-German border" between West and East Germany was pleasant. After watching the Northern German plains pass by my window for another half hour and declining the steward's trilled offer of "coffee, tea, juice, beer, wine, schnapps," at 12:15 p.m. I landed at an even smaller and sleepier station, where Alexander von Plato picked me up. On the way, we stopped at one of the family's old friends whom he had met at a New Year's Eve party in the 1970s and whom the family now cared for. After a stroll through the garden, I met Alexander's wife, Alice. Jumping around us was their dog, Polka. On our way to the family home, we stopped in Lüchow to buy groceries for dinner. After leaving to our right the hamlet of Plate - it is not clear whether the

Platos gave the town its name or vice versa - we arrived at the family's estate, Obergut Grabow. The court, as big as a football field, is surrounded by two houses and various farm buildings. Alexander's older brother and his family live in one house, Alexander and his family in the other. For now, however, they live there only during holidays and on weekends, because Alice works as a high school teacher in Stade near Hamburg, where they spend most of their time. I met several family members, all of whom greeted me warmly. The children of Alexander and Alice were home over the Easter holidays. Judith had brought her boyfriend, Johannes one of his friends.



Alexander von Plato (photo provided by A. von Plato)

Around 3 p.m., Alexander and I settled in his small, light-filled office and began the interview. With but a few short breaks and a one-hour break for dinner with the family, the interview lasted until 11:00 p.m. - longer than either of us had

anticipated. By 10:00 p.m., we gave up plans for my return to Berlin that evening, and the family invited me to stay overnight. Next day, I returned to Berlin, but only after an early morning stroll to the private family cemetery and a hearty breakfast with the whole family and Alexander's brother dropping in with fresh buns.

The development of oral history in Germany, as becomes clear in the interview, has differed from that in North America in several significant ways. Although there had been major projects on refugees and expellees as well as returning prisoners-of-war in the late 1940s and 1950s, the new oral history that developed as a method for the new social history of the 1960s and as its own movement for democratizing history in the 1970s emerged later in Germany than in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. One of the major reasons for this delay was that to West German liberal and leftist historians, the people or the *Volk*, had been suspect ever since its double corruption by the Nazi regime. The mass of German people had supported the Nazis. Moreover, the Nazis had exploited the concept of *Volk* when they based their claims of racial superiority and the need for expansion, which eventually resulted in World War Two and the Holocaust, on the German people. Thus, West German liberal and leftist historians after the war distanced themselves from the *Volk* by conceptualizing social history as social science history, which relied heavily on sociological models, such as modernization theory. Social history in the form of people's history, history from below, the history of every-day life, or the history of popular culture did not make inroads until the late 1970s.

There were also methodological suspicions about oral history. When asking people to tell their life stories, would oral historians not hear the same white-washed answers that the denazification tribunals of the late 1940s had heard - the stories that nobody had supported Hitler or been a member of the Nazi party?¹ As Karin Hartewig pointedly asked in 1990: "Was it not well established that people were lying about their past and that historians had to convict them of their real past instead of listening to their distorting voices?"² For the same reason, the postwar projects on refugees and PoWs were suspect: any project that could be seen as casting Germans as victims was suspect of being revanchist and equating German suffering with that of the Nazi victims.

Thus, it was not until the late 1970s that oral history took off in Germany. Historians of women and workers, of every-day life and popular culture became increasingly discontent with the deterministic paradigms of social science history's focus on structures and functions. As in other countries, they discovered oral history as a means to collect or create sources of people who did not otherwise leave any traces. Moreover, a new generation of historians who had been shaped by the events of "1968" and after came into the universities. Their search for an explanation of the Third Reich and the Holocaust had not been

satisfied by structuralist history. “[B]y the 70’s and 80’s this generation suffered a severe crisis of identity.”³ They turned to oral history to find the unknown heroes of the past - workers and women resisting the Nazi regime - and to identify with them rather than with their middle- and upper-class parents. They found neither, but in their search they discovered the power of oral history. Lutz Niethammer, one of Germany’s foremost oral historians, in the late 1970s established a major project on the working-classes of the industrial Ruhr Valley between the 1930s and 1960s.⁴ He and his colleagues, Alexander von Plato among them, showed that 1945 had been much less of a break in German history than previously assumed. In 1987, two and one half years before the fall of wall, Niethammer, von Plato and Dorothee Wierling were allowed to conduct interviews in East Germany, under the supervision of East German authorities, who also provided logistical support.⁵

At the same time, international connections - first with other West European countries and the United States, later with South American and East European countries - developed. Nevertheless, German oral historians developed a distinct approach to interviewing that Alexander von Plato has described as a three-phase “semi-open, narrative life-history interview.” He later added a fourth phase to the interview process.

Phase 1 is the life history phase: After explaining to the interviewee the interview procedure, the interviewer simply asks: “Please, tell me your life story.” Thus, in the first stage, people are given the opportunity to tell their life story with as little interference by the interviewer as possible. Such an approach should help historians understand how people plan, design, and construct their life stories and why they do it in the way they choose; whether they talk about key-events as explanations of major changes or even biographical transitions in their lives; which larger social interpretive patterns are underlying the individual life story and how conscious the narrator is of this; whether larger interpretive patterns are culturally specific (e.g. “the American success story,” the German post-World War Two story of victimhood and ignorance); the narrator’s major life themes and topics (e.g. which events does he or she focus on, which are neglected or de-emphasized?); the significance and meaning of silences (that may become visible or rather audible when questions are asked later on). The underlying interest is to find patterns in individuals’ stories that will tell us something about society and culture.

Phase 2 is a brief clarification phase, where the interviewer asks basic questions to make sure everything was understood correctly.

Phase 3 is the stage where the interviewer asks all those questions that have not already been answered. The problem that arises from the third phase according to von Plato is the how to determine if and when a question has been answered “completely” or “fully” or to the fullest extent possible. Obviously, this

depends on the purpose of the project. The question is most problematic of course for the archival practice of oral history. The purpose of the oral historian creating an oral history as a source for future historians without an immediate project purpose in mind is the question which subjects future historians could be interested in. But this phase of questioning also reminds us again that oral history is more than the simple storytelling a la StoryCorps.com that has become *en vogue* these days. Oral history means to ask specific questions to get below narrative conventions and popular images that may mask rather than describe people's experiences. Questions are important to get to the lived experiences. This is the case even when it becomes clear during an interview -- even a semi-public one, for instance, in front of a school class -- that a narrator tells stories about experiences he did not have. Von Plato insists that most often it is in the interest of all to ask, humbly and carefully, specific questions about details, not in order to expose or humiliate, but in order to understand and help the eyewitness himself to understand. The oral historian must ask questions to get at the relationship between story and experience. To simply assume that the two match is to take testimony at face value -- something a historian should not do.

Phase 4, introduced by von Plato into German oral history practice, is a stage he calls confrontation, argument, or debate: At the end of the interview, the interviewer tells the interviewee with which points he disagrees. The point is not to judge the interviewee, but rather to determine that one did not misunderstand the interviewee and also to inform him or her that one will talk about these critical points in any later publications. In one way, it is the beginning of an explicit collaborative interpretation of the interviewee's life story -- explicit, because implicitly such interpretation begins even before the interview is started, be it through the historian's project design or through the selection of an interviewee.

Among the many projects Alexander von Plato has worked for, initiated, organized, and led, his book on the reunification of Germany is his favourite. In order to reconstruct what options political leaders had and discussed in the wake of a quickly changing world political situation in 1990, von Plato used secret Russian archival sources not accessible to other researchers as well as interviews with, among others, George H. Bush, Michail Gorbatschow, Helmut Kohl, Hans Modrow, and some eighty other major politicians involved in the international negotiations about the unification of the two German states.⁶

Alexander von Plato founded the Institute for History and Biography at the Fern-Universität Hagen (Distance University Hagen) in 1993 and was its director until 2007. The Institute conducts life history projects and produces documentary movies. It also runs the "German Memory" archive of oral histories and similar sources and has been the International Oral History Association's secretariat since 1996. The Institute publishes *BIOS. Journal for Biographical Research, Oral History and Life Course Analysis*, Germany's only oral history

journal, co-founded by von Plato in 1988. He continues to serve as publisher and editor of the journal.⁷

Since his retirement in 2007, von Plato has continued to work on several oral history projects, but he has also begun contemplating other genres to write about history. For the future of oral history, he wishes that it will become accepted as one among a multitude of methods to learn about the past and as a powerful tool to understand people's experiences.

Listen to Alexander von Plato to learn about oral history in Germany and about one of Germany's most influential oral historians. The interview is 6.5 hours long and split into 13 parts.

A note on the audio quality: The interview was recorded on four different recorders, two of which had partial malfunctions. Thus, sound quality varies. The main recorder was a Marantz PMD 660 with two Audio-Technica 831b lapel mics. Three tracks (15 minutes each) on the 4GB PNY Optima CF card were unreadable files, for no apparent reason. The backup machine, a Zoom H4, recorded well for the first two-and-one-half-hours but then reported a card error (4 GB Transcend SD card). At least, I could use recording from this machine to make up for the lost Marantz data. For the last half hour of the interview, we used Alexander von Plato's Zoom H2. Fortunately, I did not have to rely on my Panasonic digital voice recorder as a backup, because the sound quality is far inferior to that of the other machines.

Part 1: Life Story I: Alexander von Plato's Life Before Oral History (0:00-0:43)

In this part, Alexander von Plato tells his life story, the development of political consciousness, the break from his family, studies in Berlin and training in journalism, his first wife, "1968" and the founding of a communist party, and work as a teacher for unions. Von Plato used a few German words that I could not translate during the interview or translated incorrectly:

völkisch: national; relating to the people or nation, the *Volk*; in the Nazi sense: the racially pure and superior German nation.

Wappen: coat of arms

Bundeswehr: (West) German army

Frack: tails (not smoking)

frech: cheeky (rather than flippant)

Part 2: Life Story II: Doing Oral History in Germany (0:43-1:10)

Alexander von Plato talks about joining Lutz Niethammer's oral history project "Life history and Social Culture in the Ruhr Area 1930-1960" (LUSIR); his Ph.D. in philosophy at Free University Berlin; teaching seminars on fascism. He also

talks about his relationships with his partners and his children. He returns to talking about the LUSIR project and a later project, for which he, Lutz Niethammer and Dorothee Wierling interviewed East Germans in 1987 (they were the only historians ever allowed by the East German government to conduct such a project). Further topics include his founding of the Institute for History and Biography at the Fernuniversität Hagen and *BIOS. Journal for Biography, Oral History and Life Course Analysis*, his retirement in 2007 and work in Vienna. He also talks about the absence of an oral history association in Germany and his involvement in the International Oral History Association since its founding in 1996.

Part 3: Oral Tradition and the History of Oral History in Germany Before LUSIR (1:10-1:38)

Alexander von Plato talks about oral history before the re-establishment of oral history in Germany in the 1980s, from Thucydides to Lefebvre, Droysen, and the Grimm brothers; the history of oral tradition, forms of storytelling and stories; the Lamprecht Dispute (in the late 19th century, German historians debated the methodological approaches to history; Karl Lamprecht's view that an all-encompassing approach to history should replace the narrow political history approach was pushed aside) and postwar (1940s and 1950s) projects on refugees, expellees, and returning prisoners-of-war.

Part 4: Interviewing the German Working-Class about National Socialism (1:40-2:12)

Alexander von Plato talks about coming to understand why and to accept that the German working class consented to National Socialism. Some German words used in this segment:

Gefolgschaft: following (noun)

Deutsche Arbeitsfront (DAF): German Labour Front; after crushing all free trade unions or bringing them into line, the Nazis established the DAF as the only trade union

Schubladendenken: pigeonholing (thinking in boxes)

Volksgemeinschaft: people's community, a Nazi concept that had the goal to make the German people into a racially pure community that loyally followed the leader, thus dispensing of class struggle.

Part 5: International Connections (2:12-2:27)

In this part, Alexander von Plato talks about the development of international connections and the International Oral History Association.

Part 6: Oral history as “Detypification Shock” (2:27-2:51)

Alexander von Plato recounts learning about the German working-class experience under National Socialism; his first interviews as a learning experience about the German working-class; the idea of *Enttypisierungsschock* or de-typification shock: the historian's shock of unlearning traditional patterns of thinking (especially about the German working class's relationship to National Socialism). Asking right and wrong questions (generally, but especially in relation to finding out what the German working-class knew about the Holocaust).

References in this part:

Schweik in the Second World War, a drama by Bert Brecht.

HJ (pronounced Haa yott): Hitler Youth (*Hitler Jugend*)

Part 7: The German Approach to Oral History I (2:51-3:25)

Explaining his four-phase interview method, in this part, Alexander von Plato explains phases one to three.

Part 8: The German Approach to Oral History II (3:25-3:58)

In this part, Alexander von Plato explains phase four of his four-phase interview method. There is also a discussion about ethics and ownership of the interview.

Part 9: Subjectivity and Experience (3:58-4:31)

Alexander von Plato describes the diversity of oral history projects inside and outside of German academia and academic historians' rejection of oral history because of its "subjectivity." He explains the significance of subjectivity in oral history and points out that most historians and funding organizations failed to understand that oral history is not about finding facts but to find out how people made sense of the past. He also explains the concept of *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, the history of experience or experienced history.

Vorwurf: accusation (not claim)

Part 10: Oral History and Pedagogy (4:31-5:03)

In this part, Alexander von Plato talks about his article "Eye Witnesses and the Discipline of History: Remembrance, Communicative Transmission, and Collective Memory in the Qualitative Historical Sciences," which is published in *Forum* 29 (2009). What do teachers and historians do with eye witnesses who did not actually experience the stories they tell? Von Plato also explains the concept of *Unschärferelation* (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle), which he uses in his article.

Part 11: Themes in German Oral History I (5:03-5:33)

Alexander von Plato discusses various aspects of oral history practice in Germany, such as interviewing only old people, the role of archives, historians'

and interviewees' thematic interests, and the problems with interviewing perpetrators.

Part 12: Themes in German Oral History II (5:33-6:00)

Alexander von Plato discusses various aspects of oral history practice in Germany, such as oral history in literature, novels by Walter Kempowski, documentary films, three-generational interviews, the use of interviews in German television documentaries.

Part 13: Oral History's Achievements (6:00-6:35)

Alexander von Plato evaluates the achievements of oral history in a larger context of historiography in the second half of the 20th century. He also talks about his hopes for the future development of oral history and the concept of *Eigen-Sinn*, the people's sense of self vis-à-vis authority (incorrectly translated in the interview as 'spite,' but more like defiance and stubbornness). Von Plato also describes his personal future plans.

Publications by Alexander von Plato:

Monographs (since 1984)

Plato, Alexander von, Almut Leh and Christoph Thonfeld, eds. *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*. Wien, Köln, Weimar 2008

Plato, Alexander v. *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands - ein weltpolitisches Machtspiel. Bush, Kohl, Gorbatschow und die geheimen Moskauer Protokolle*. Berlin 2002.

Plato, Alexander v., ed. *Die DDR in der Erinnerung, Studienbrief der Fernuniversität Hagen*. Hagen 1999.

Plato, Alexander v., ed. *Studien und Berichte, Band 1 der Reihe „Sowjetische Speziallager in Deutschland 1945 bis 1950“* (Reihe hg. von S. Mironenko, L. Niethammer, A. v. Plato (Koordination) in Verbindung mit V. Knigge und G. Morsch). Berlin 1998.

Plato, Alexander v. and Almut Leh. *„Ein unglaublicher Frühling“. Erfahrene Geschichte im Nachkriegsdeutschland (Dokumente und Analysen)*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 1997.

Plato, Alexander v. *Eine zweite "Entnazifizierung"?* In: Rainer Eckert, Rainer, Alexander v. Plato and Jörn Schütrumpf, eds. *Wendezeiten - Zeitenwände. Zur "Entnazifizierung" und "Entstalinisierung"*. Hamburg 1991.

- Niethammer, Lutz, Alexander v. Plato and Dorothee Wierling. *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR. 30 biographische Eröffnungen*. Berlin 1991.
- Plato, Alexander v. and Lutz Niethammer, eds.: *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960, vol. 3: "Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten." Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern*. Berlin/Bonn 1985.
- Plato, Alexander v. and Wolfgang Meinicke. *Alte Heimat – neue Zeit, Flüchtlinge, Vertriebene, Umgesiedelte in der SBZ und DDR*. Berlin 1991.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Der Verlierer geht nicht leer aus." *Betriebsräte geben zu Protokoll* Berlin/Bonn 1984.

Articles (since 1992)

- Plato, Alexander v. "Lebensgeschichtliche Erinnerungszeugnisse in Museen und Ausstellungen," in: *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 5/2 (1992).
- Plato, Alexander v. "Sowjetische Sonderlager in SBZ und DDR," in: *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 5/2 (1992): 248-254.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Lebenswelten und politische Orientierung im Revier. Zur Struktur politischen Bewußtseins bei Arbeitern und Unternehmern im Ruhrgebiet," in Ottfried Dascher and Christian Kleinschmidt. *Die Eisen- und Stahlindustrie im Dortmunder Raum. Wirtschaftliche Entwicklung, soziale Strukturen und technologischer Wandel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Dortmund 1992.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Oral History als Erfahrungswissenschaft. Zum Stand der 'mündlichen Geschichte' in Deutschland," in: *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History*, 4/1 (1991). Reprinted in: Konrad H. Jarausch et al., eds. *Geschichtswissenschaft vor 2000. Perspektiven der Historiographieggeschichte, Geschichtstheorie, Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift für Georg Iggers*. Hagen 1992.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Fremdes Deutschland," in: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, *Gemeinsam sind wir unterschiedlich*. Bonn 1993.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Plädoyer für eine Erfahrungsgeschichte der Nachkriegszeit," in: Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, ed. *Adenauerzeit. Stand, Perspektiven und methodische Aufgaben der Zeitgeschichtsforschung (1945-1967)*. Bonn 1993.
- Plato, Alexander v. "'Wirtschaftskapitäne.' Biographische Selbstkonstruktionen von Unternehmern der Nachkriegszeit," in: Axel Schildt Axel and Arnold Sywottek, eds. *Modernisierung im Wiederaufbau. Die westdeutsche Gesellschaft der 50er Jahre*, Bonn 1993.

- Plato, Alexander v. "An Unfamiliar Germany: Some Remarks on the Past and Present Relationship between East and West Germans," in: *Oral History. Journal of the Oral History Society (UK)* 21/1 (Spring 1993).
- Plato, Alexander v. "Deutsch-russisches Kooperationsprojekt über Sonderlager in der Sowjetisch besetzten Zone. Neue Akten zur Lagerverwaltung, zur Stimmung unter den Häftlingen und zum Geheimdienst," in: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, ed. *Die Akten der Kommunistischen Gewaltherrschaft - Schlußstrich oder Aufarbeitung?* Reihe Bautzen-Forum Nr. 5, Leipzig 1994.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Flüchtlinge, Umgesiedelte und Vertriebene in Ost und West," in: J. P. Barbian and Ludger Heid, eds. *Zwischen gestern und morgen. Kriegsende und Wiederaufbau.* Essen 1995.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Die innerdeutsche Grenze im westdeutschen Spielfilm, in: Gesellschaft für Filmstudien e.V., ed. "Wir Wunderkinder." Hannover 1995.
- Plato, Alexander v. "The Hitler Youth Generation and its role in the post-war Germany States," in: Mark Roseman, ed. *Generations in Conflict. Youth Rebellion and Generation Formation in Modern Germany 1770 - 1968.* Cambridge University Press 1995.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Les Allemagnes: le problème des réorientations politiques après 1945 et après 1989," in: *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, No. 132 (Avril-Juin 1995), 150-166.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Helden des Fortschritts? Zum Selbstbild von Technikern und Ingenieuren im Nationalsozialismus und in der Nachkriegszeit," in: Wilhelm Füßl and Stefan Ittner eds. *Biographie und Technikgeschichte.* Leverkusen 1998.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Experienced History. The Establishment of Oral History in Germany," in: *Words and Silences*, Bulletin of the International Oral History Association 1/3 (May 1998).
- Plato, Alexander v. "Erfahrungsgeschichte - von der Etablierung der Oral History," in: Gerd Jüttemann and Hans Thomae, eds. *Biographische Methoden in den Humanwissenschaften.* Weinheim 1998.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Mythen des Widerstandes," Paris 1998.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Erfahrungen junger Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *BIOS*, 11/1 (1998).
- Plato, Alexander v. "Geschichte und Psychologie – Oral History und Psychoanalyse," in: *BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 11/2 (1998): 171-200.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Sowjetische Speziallager in Deutschland 1945 – 1950. Ergebnisse eines deutsch-russischen Forschungsprojektes," in: Peter Reif-Spirek and Bodo Ritscher, eds. *Speziallager in der SBZ. Gedenkstätten mit doppelter Vergangenheit.* Berlin 1999.

- Plato, Alexander v. "Opferkonkurrenten?" In: Elisabeth Domansky and Harald Welzer, eds. *Eine offene Geschichte. Zur kommunikativen Tradierung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit*. Tübingen 1999.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Victims competition?" in: *International Journal on audio-visual Testimony* – Fondation Auschwitz Bruxelles, December 1998, 7-14.
- Plato, Alexander v. "'Entstasifizierung' im Öffentlichen Dienst der neuen Bundesländer nach 1989. Umorientierung und Kontinuität in der Lehrerschaft," in: *Jahrbuch für Historische Bildungsforschung* 5 (1999): 313–342.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Zehn Jahre danach – Protagonisten der Wiedervereinigung (Befragungs- und Beratungsprojekt für das ZDF)," in: *BIOS* 12/2 (1999): 257–269.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Zeitzeugen und die historische Zunft. Erinnerung, kommunikative Tradierung und kollektives Gedächtnis in der qualitativen Geschichtswissenschaft – ein Problemaufriss," in: *BIOS* 13/1 (2000): 5–29.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Vergangene Perspektiven? Schwerpunkte, Fragen und Probleme der Flüchtlingsforschung vor und nach der Wende," in: Dierk Hoffman, Marita Krauss und Michael Schwartz, eds. *Vertriebene in Deutschland. Interdisziplinäre Ergebnisse und Forschungsperspektiven*. Munich 2000.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Widersprüchliche Erinnerungen. Internationale Protagonisten der Wiedervereinigung und nationale Vereinigungsmythen," in: *BIOS* 14/1 (2001), 37–72.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Denunziation im Systemwechsel. Verhaftete, Deportierte und Lagerhäftlinge in der SBZ um 1945," in: Inge Marszolek und Olaf Stieglitz, eds. "Denunziation im 20. Jahrhundert. Zwischen Komparatistik und Interdisziplinarität," special issue of *Historische Sozialforschung/Historical Social Research* 26/2-3 (2001): 179–203.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Wo sind die ungläubigen Kinder geblieben? Kritik einiger Thesen des Projektes Tradierung von Geschichtsbewußtsein," in: *WerkstattGeschichte* 30 (2001): 64ff.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Lebensgeschichte und Geschichte," in: *Kursbuch* 148/2002.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Vittime in competizione?" in: *L'umanità offesa. Stermini e memoria nell'Europa del Novecento*, a cura di Gustavo Corni, Gerhard Hirschfeld. Bologna 2003.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Seven crucial points concerning reunification of Germany," in: *Words & Silences* (Journal of the International Oral History Association) 2/1 (June 2003): 25-30.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Janus als Zeuge? Zeitzeugen-Erinnerungen und das Problem der 'Verdrängung,'" in: Dagmar Unverhau, ed. *Hatte „Janus“ eine Chance?*

Das Ende der DDR und die Sicherung einer Zukunft der Vergangenheit.
Münster 2003.

- Plato, Alexander v. "Flucht und Vertreibung. Lebensgeschichte, Erinnerung und Realgeschichte. Vom geteilten kollektiven Gedächtnis in Deutschland," in: Jan Motte and Rainer Ohliger, eds. *Geschichte und Gedächtnis in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft. Migration zwischen historischer Rekonstruktion und Erinnerungspolitik.* Essen 2004.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Waren 'wir' unfähig zu trauern? Vor 40 Jahren erschien *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* von Alexander und Margarethe Mitscherlich. Ein persönlich-historiographischer Rückblick," in: Gudrun Brockhaus, ed. *Ist "Unfähigkeit zu trauern" noch aktuell? Eine interdisziplinäre Diskussion (psychosozial 31/114-IV 2008):* 49-60.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Biographische Konstruktionen und kollektive Konflikte nach der Wiedervereinigung," in *Psychoanalytische Familientherapie* 7/13-II (2006): 87-100.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Geschichte ohne Zeitzeugen? Einige Fragen zur 'Erfahrung' im Übergang von Zeitgeschichte zur Geschichte," in: Fritz Bauer Institut, ed. *Zeugenschaft des Holocaust. Zwischen Trauma, Tradierung und Ermittlung.* Frankfurt/New York 2007.
- Plato, Alexander v. "Moderne Sklaverei – lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich: ein Projektbericht," in: Stiftung „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft“, ed., *Zeugen und Zeugnisse. Bildungsprojekte zur NS-Zwangsarbeit mit Jugendlichen.* Berlin 2008.

Films and Multimedia Presentations

- "Erlebte DDR." Three-part series about life in the GDR for 3sat. 1992/1993.
Script and, with Holger Riedl, direction.
- "Rückblenden," for Westdeutsches Fernsehen (WDR 3), films about the occupation of the Ruhr area in 1923, about Friedrich Harkort, about Rhineland separatism, about family and school in the GDR.
- "Deutschlandspiel." Two-part docudrama on the German reunification for ZDF. 1999/2000. Treatment, interviews und academic consulting.
- Five academic films for the Brandenburg Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 1993-1996:
1. Berufserfahrungen von Lehrerinnen und Lehrer der DDR (Part 1 1993)
 2. Berufserfahrungen von Lehrerinnen und Lehrer der DDR (Part 2 1995)
 3. Prag 1968 und die Schulen der DDR (Script and direction)

4. Forschendes Lernen an einem Beispiel von 10jährigen auf der Suche nach ihrer Vorgängerschule an der Mauer
5. Elternhaus und Schule in der DDR (Script and direction)

Movies for the national museum Haus der Geschichte, Bonn, about:

- compensation;
- German and Russian prisoners-of-war in the Second World War;
- for the exhibition “Markt oder Plan,” about the establishment of the economic systems in East and West Germany after the Second World War (all on CD, may be presented with a touch-screen monitor). 1996-1998.

Several movies (on video or digitized on CD, may be presented with a touch-screen monitor):

- for the memorial site in Buchenwald about special camps (Speziallager) in Germany (with Loretta Walz) 1997;
- for the Sinti and Roma of Heidelberg (central exhibition), 1998;
- for the “Deutsche Arbeitsschutzausstellung” in Dortmund about weavers and weaving mills, shift work, electronic jobs, job security, jobs for the disabled, 1998;
- for the memorial site Torgau (about Germany Army justice (Wehrmachtsjustiz) and Soviet special camps (Speziallager) 1998-1999;
- for the memorial site Ravensbrück, with Loretta Walz (interview and installations) 1999-2003;
- for the memorial site Bautzen (special camp and GDR justice (Speziallager and DDR-Justiz)), 1998–2000;
- for the Hagener Historische Zentrum (forced labour (Zwangsarbeit) in Hagen) 2002.

Films for WDR University television, including:

- “Die sowjetische Politik unter Gorbatschow zur Wiedervereinigung. Alexander v. Plato im Gespräch mit Nikolai Portugalow,” (broadcast 8 January 2000);
- “Die Politik des Bundeskanzleramtes und die Wiedervereinigung. Alexander v. Plato im Gespräch mit Horst Teltschik” (2001).
- “Der letzte Ministerpräsident der DDR und die Wiedervereinigung. Alexander v. Plato im Gespräch mit Lothar de Maizière.” (2001)
- “Der frühere Außenminister und die Wiedervereinigung. Alexander v. Plato im Gespräch mit Hans-Dietrich Genscher” (2002).

Cite the interview (Chicago style):

Alexander Freund, “Interview with Alexander von Plato, Grabow, Germany, 8 April

Alexander Freund, “Oral History as Experienced History (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*) - An Interview with Alexander von Plato”

Oral History Forum d'histoire orale 29 (2009)

2009," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009).

Cite this article (Chicago style):

Alexander Freund, "Oral History as Experienced History (*Erfahrungsgeschichte*) -- An Interview with Alexander von Plato," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009), 1-15.

¹ Karin Hartewig, "Oral History in West Germany," *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* (Special Issue 1990), 115-128, 116.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴ Published in three volumes: Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930-1960*, vol. 1: "Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll." *Faschismuserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*; *ibid.* (ed.), vol. 2: "Hinterher merkt man, daß es richtig war, daß es schiefgegangen ist." *Nachkriegserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet*; *ibid.* and Alexander von Plato (eds.), vol. 3: "Wir kriegen jetzt andere Zeiten." *Auf der Suche nach der Erfahrung des Volkes in nachfaschistischen Ländern* (Berlin, Bonn: Dietz, 1983).

⁵ Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, *Die volkseigene Erfahrung. Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR. 30 biographische Eröffnungen* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

⁶ Alexander von Plato, *Die Vereinigung Deutschlands -- ein weltpolitisches Machtspiel. Bush, Kohl, Gorbatschow und die geheimen Moskauer Protokolle* (Berlin: Links, 2002).

⁷ For more information about the Institute and BIOS, see <http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/geschichteundbiographie/>.