

Manuscripts, Images, and Biographies of Daniel Chwolson: New Details from the Archives of St. Petersburg¹

by Dimitri Bratkin

Abstract

The St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy (PFA RAN) contains two manuscript biographies of Daniel Chwolson, the Russian-Jewish Orientalist, advocate of Jewish scholarship, and bridge builder to the Breslau Jewish Theological Seminary. They were written by his pupil and colleague, Pavel Kokovtsov, and his grandson Yevgeny Chwolson, respectively. These two texts are studied against the background of published texts and popular opinion of Chwolson in late Imperial Russia. Apart from some details, these manuscripts offer limited additional information as factual sources, most of their contents being mere variation of published texts. However, the biography of Chwolson written by his grandson is a valuable source on the reception of Chwolson and illustrates the potential of further mythological appreciation of his personality and works in the Soviet time as a defense strategy for Chwolson's family. It also contains crucial information on the fate of Chwolson's archive.

1. Introduction

For the history of scholarship, Daniel Chwolson (1819 [1822]–1911) remains the founder of Semitic studies in St. Petersburg.² His academic record covers an

¹ This article was written for the project 16-18-10083 of the Russian Science Foundation “The Study of Religion in Social and Cultural Contexts of the Epoch: The History of Religious Studies and Intellectual History of Russia from the nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century.

² Note on transliteration: Despite a strong recent tendency to introduce the English transliteration “Khvolson” or “Khvol’son” for the Cyrillic “Хвольсон,” I use the German “Chwolson”, since it was favored by the bearer himself. For the sake of consistency, it is applied to the rest of his family as well. Note on archival references: The St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy Archive is abbreviated PFA RAN by its transliterated Russian acronym. Archival references are indicated as

unusually long period of service across three institutions of higher education. Yet, from 1855 until his death in 1911, he taught Hebrew and Aramaic in the Oriental Languages Faculty of the Imperial St. Petersburg University. In 1858, he was appointed to teach Hebrew and Biblical Archaeology at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, which belonged to the state Orthodox Christian Church, and remained in service until 1883. Within that same interval of 1858–1884, he also taught Hebrew at the St. Petersburg Roman Catholic Academy.

No surprise, indeed, that the very figure of Chwolson should attract biographers' interest. He was a Jewish child prodigy from the poorest backcountry regions of Vilna, an autodidact who managed to study later under Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Heinrich Leberecht Fleischer (1801–1888), and then in less than a decade secured himself a position as *the* personal protégé of a Russian Imperial Minister of Public Education, *the* professor of Semitics, and a member in correspondence of the Imperial Russian Academy, whose would-be theologians were later to study under his supervision for the price of his conversion to state-sanctioned Catholicism. Chwolson taught Hebrew to the Catholic students, who mostly came from Polish and Lithuanian territories occupied by the Russian Empire and who were meant to return as trained parish priests to care for the congregations that rubbed shoulders with Jewish neighbors in the Pale. Chwolson was an ardent polemicist against blood libels and all other sorts of Antisemitism. In his later decades, he advocated for the promotion of education among Jews, and especially among candidates for rabbinic office. In the field of scholarship, he is best known for his participation in the lengthy and heated debate over the famous Abraham (Firkovich) Firkowicz's collections and the highly disputable accusations of alleged forgeries it was said to contain. Abraham Firkovich (1786–1874) was the famous Karaite Hakham ("Wise") and antiquarian, whose vast collections were eventually acquired into the Russian Imperial Public Library in 1860s and 1870s. Although the value of those was undisputed, Firkovich was repeatedly accused of forgery, which produced a lengthy disputation among the learned. Of those Chwolson was most sympathetic towards Firkovich, and by and large, the only scholar whose case for him would be most sustained. One could imagine that such a diverse, controversial, and important figure

follows: *fond* number, *opis* number (inventory list, abbreviated *op.*), item number in preservation (*edinita khreneniia*, abbreviated *ed. khr.*), folio number (*list*, abbreviated *L.*).

would become the subject of extensive research. Yet, this is far from the case. Chwolson's life is painfully understudied.³

This historiographical lacuna may at least partly be explained by the fact that public archives provide a very limited number of documentary materials on Chwolson's life and work. As of this writing, there are some 200 items available that are mainly shared between the St. Petersburg Branch of the Archive of the Russian Academy (*fond* 959) and the Archive of the Orientalists in the Institute of Oriental Studies (*fond* 55). The collection is neither a full *Nachlass*, nor even representative as a corpus of personal papers. Likewise, there is no hint of any memoirs or autobiographical narratives presented by Chwolson himself, such as those of Simon Dubnov (1860–1941). One may suppose that his reluctance to touch on the subtle and controversial issues of his career and conversion may account for that. However, the disappearance of his personal papers goes against every custom that existed in Russian academia prior to the Bolshevik takeover and is even more clamant when compared with the careful preservation of Chwolson's library. Such a situation urges researchers to take the fullest possible account of every piece of evidence that has survived. This evidence, in turn, is very diverse and, in general, strongly opinionated.

Chwolson's memory and reception was forced into a limited number of standard narrative plots. These plots sometimes overlapped to such an extent that Chwolson would be depicted mainly, if not only, as a convert *par excellence* and even a confessing opportunist.⁴ Solomon Zeitlin (1886/1892–1976), who claimed personal knowledge of Chwolson, pronounced a harsh judgment on Chwolson,⁵ whereas another witness of Chwolson's final days had a much

³ There is no full biography on Chwolson written either in Russian, Hebrew, or any other Western language. The most important works include Shulamit Magnus: *Good Bad Jews. Converts, Conversion, and Boundary Redrawing in Modern Russian Jewry. Notes Toward a New Category*, in: Susan A. Glenn/Naomi B. Sokoloff (eds.), *Boundaries in Jewish Identity*, Seattle 2010, pp. 132–160; Andrew C. Reed: *For One's Brothers. Daniil Avraamovich Khvol'son and the "Jewish Question" in Russia 1819–1911*, Arizona State University 2014, online: https://repository.asu.edu/attachments/135002/content/Reed_asu_0010E_13920.pdf (last accessed 25.02.2018).

⁴ Lucy Dawidowicz: *The Golden Tradition. Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*, New York 1967, p. 335; Louis Jacobs: *The Jewish Religion*, Oxford 1995, pp. 99–100; Christoph Gassenschmidt, in: Khvol'son, Daniil Avraamovich. *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, online: http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khvolson_Daniil_Avraamovich (last accessed 14.09.2017).

⁵ Zeitlin, S. Review: *Blood Accusation. The Strange History of the Beiless Case* by Maurice Samuel, in: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 59 (1968) 1, pp. 76–80.

more sympathetic opinion of him.⁶ Shulamit Magnus has recently shown that the image of Chwolson in the works of Jewish historians who wrote in Yiddish such as Shmuel Leib Zitron (1860–1930) and Shaul Ginzburg (1866–1940) was prone both to apologetic and accusatorial intonations.⁷

There exist five biographical narratives of Chwolson that have received little, if any, attention from Western scholars, for the most obvious reason: all but one is written in Russian. The genre of a journal article limits extensive translations from these narratives, however, having biographical interest in Daniel Chwolson, one may expect that the sources discussed below will in due course appear in some more readable language. Where those translations would nevertheless be helpful. In cases where the original texts are either unpublished or printed, I quote the parts that I consider most important.

In this essay, I concentrate on two linked aims. My first aim is to introduce the sources that essentially comprise *the* corpus of biographic material on Daniel Chwolson. Although documents and letters can be found elsewhere, e.g. in Moscow, the archival materials of St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy Archive provide much more insight in his life and work. Of these we are fortunate to have biographical narratives composed by authors who claim personal knowledge of him and draw on interviews with him. In order to incorporate them into the broader scholarly narrative, one has to analyze the patterns behind these biographical presentations which is the second aim of the article. In total, I present five documents. Of these all but one was written by former students or by Chwolson's academic colleagues. The fifth biography was composed by Chwolson's grandson, long after the death of the scholar, and after the October Revolution of 1917. In regard to the last biography I argue that the text is secondary as a factual source of Chwolson's life, however, it is important to understand it as an attempt to accommodate Chwolson within the early Soviet context, and thus to produce a novel version of "Chwolson folklore" posthumously.⁸

⁶ Zalman Shazar: Baron David Günzberg [sic!] and His Academy, in: *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 57 (1967), p. 3.

⁷ Shulamit Magnus, *Good Bad Jews*, pp. 143–146.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated, translations from the Russian originals are mine. For the sake of brevity and following the suggestion of the reviewer of the article, I omitted most of the reasoning behind the dates of the archival documents; they will be published separately. The Publication of the original texts from the unpublished documents is planned for 2018.

2. David Günzburg's Eulogy

The first source I wish to introduce is a jubilee eulogy that was published as a series of articles in *Voskhod* from November 21, 1899 until January 13, 1900⁹ to mark Chwolson's eightieth anniversary.¹⁰ This is the least unknown contemporary biography of Chwolson, since parts of it (less than one-tenth in total) were published in English by Lucy Dawidowicz.¹¹ Her translation, however, is at best misleading, since Dawidowicz compiled different parts of the original text arbitrarily. No wonder Shulamit Magnus merely mentioned this abridgement in passing apparently without knowledge of the full text.¹² And truly, it is strange to imagine why one would feel obliged to consult the full original version as Dawidowicz's rendering has almost turned it into a piece of puffed rhetoric. And albeit this jubilee publication is inevitably rhetorical by demand of its date, its genre, and its author's deep affection towards Chwolson (so aptly presented by Dawidowicz), it has value as a biographical source on top, and in spite, of all that standard language of admiration. Andrew Reed, who worked with Chwolson's papers in the St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy Archive apparently consulted only the first part of the copy that is available in the same *fond* in the file of newspaper clippings.¹³

The first part of the article was printed in No. 51 on the very day of Chwolson's jubilee on November 21, 1899, and the subsequent No. 52 contained an account of the celebrations. First to visit the octogenarian was a "large delegation from the Jewish institutions of St. Petersburg, then that of the colleagues from the Oriental Faculty of the University."¹⁴ This account quoted the honorific addresses from the Jewish and academic institutions on the whole and listed Jewish societies, professors and rabbis who sent congratulation telegrams.

⁹ Yubilei professora D.A. Khvolsona. (Jubilee of Professor Chwolson), in: *Voskhod* (Sunrise) 51 (1899), col. 1604–1607; *Vos'midesyatiletnei yubilei professora Khvolsona (Prodolzheniye)* (Eightieth Jubilee of Professor Chwolson, Continued) 52 (1899), 1635–1637; D.A. Khvolson (Prodolzheniye) (D.A. Chwolson, Continued) 54, col. 1707–1709; 58, col. 1834–1839; 2 (1900), col. 13–17; D.A. Khvolson (Okonchaniye) (D.A. Chwolson, End) 3, col. 11–17. Hereafter referred to by issue and column number.

¹⁰ (Unsigned) *Chestvovaniye professora D.A. Khvolsona* [Honouring Professor D.A. Chwolson], in: *Voskhod* 52 (1899), col. 1642–1645.

¹¹ Dawidowicz, *Golden Tradition*, pp. 336–338.

¹² Magnus, *Good Bad Jews*, p. 158.

¹³ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1. ed. khr. 53, l. 16–23. The copy of *Voskhod* in the Russian National Library (former State Public Library) may not be accessible at the time of Reed's stay in St. Petersburg.

¹⁴ (Unsigned) *Chestvovaniye*. 1641.

The eulogy was written by the same person who had organized the celebrations: Baron David Günzburg (1857–1910), one of the most notable members of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg at that time. He had been a student of Chwolson, one of his ardent admirers and close younger friends. The published text is at least partly based upon oral history, and thus it is the most important biographical source. The first article in the series covers Chwolson's family background, childhood, and early years until the age of 18. Then, young Joseph Chwolson¹⁵ mastered the Latin alphabet, and three languages, namely German, French, and Russian. He went on foot from Vilna to Riga, whence he then tramped to Breslau.¹⁶ The second part describes his work on his dissertation and preparation to its publication, up until his return to Russia in 1851.¹⁷ Part three deals first with Chwolson's marriage, his subsequent divorce, and second marriage to the girl from the Cohn family.¹⁸ Part four discusses Chwolson's return to Russia, the patrons he acquired in academia, and his friendship with Avraam Norov (1795–1869), a civil servant, historian, writer, and traveler, that resulted in his professorial appointment.¹⁹ Günzburg mentions no baptism at all, and only an understanding and keen reader will notice an oblique allusion to Chwolson's conversion (and to the suspicions of career-seeking) in the words:

"One thing I may say for sure: bad motives and a desire to secure his own future have never governed Chwolson in any decision that relates to moral duty, and he has never acted against his conscience. For this reason, he has always had the most devoted friends in every part of society. Thus, my grandfather nimbly compared him to Queen Esther."²⁰

Part five covers Chwolson's scholarly works and progress as professor in the Oriental Faculty. Touching upon the subtle issue of Abraham Firkowicz's collection, Günzburg writes:

¹⁵ Daniel was Chwolson's baptismal name, see also next footnote.

¹⁶ Voskhod, № 51, col. 1604–1607.

¹⁷ Voskhod, № 52, col. 1635–1637.

¹⁸ Voskhod, № 54, col. 1707–1709.

¹⁹ Voskhod, № 58, col. 1834–1839. Avraam Sergeyevich Norov became deputy minister since 1840, then minister of public education from 1853–1858. Norov was the godfather of Daniel Chwolson at his baptism, thus Chwolson's Christian patronymic 'Avraamovich' or colloquial 'Abramovich' was derived from Norov's Christian name.

²⁰ Voskhod, № 58, col. 1837.

"[Chwolson's] work [on Hebrew manuscripts and epigraphy] was impeded by the pursuing of personal and national goals on the side of the tireless collector, the Karaite Firkowicz. It was difficult for an honest and straightforward man [i.e. Chwolson] to get used to the idea that the elder known to him and distinguished in intelligence and energy set sail into bargaining with his conscience and indulged himself in erasures, additions and alterations to the letter-forms of the antique monuments and even subscripts to the manuscripts. This advanced into the heated debate from which a new discipline arose, that is, Hebrew palaeography. [...] These palaeographical investigations caused, in passing, that the Imperial Public Library acquired, in two instalments, the collections of Firkowicz, which now give honour to the Library and nourishment to many learned minds. [...] Is it not to the merit of Professor Chwolson that he caused the retention of such valuable manuscripts in St. Petersburg athwart the minds of pusillanimous advice-givers? Much could be said in general about this side of Daniil Abramovich's [i.e. Chwolson's – D.B.] activities in the field of Hebrew palaeography, but there is no place to get deep into a strictly scholarly evaluation of his works. This will be the subject of a fuller biography of him that is to appear in French. In general, it is sufficient for us for the time being to rest satisfied with a few strokes that mark his moral image. Not resting upon the period of passionate discussions about the Jewish inscriptions, we should say that now those two mighty pugilists, Chwolson and [Albert Abraham] Harkavy, who were isolated for so long and who are equally dear to the heart of every Russian Jew, both returned honoured from the battlefield, where neither has won or lost, and have shaken hands."²¹

Günzburg avoids commenting about Chwolson's stance on the Firkowicz collection and his relationship with Albert Harkavy (1835–1919).²² Finally, the sixth part covered the subject that was even more problematic for the Jewish audience, namely Chwolson's professorship in Christian theological institutions.²³ Here, Günzburg emphasizes the difference between Chwolson and his

²¹ Voskhod, №2, col. 15–16.

²² Albert (Abraham) Harkavy was a notable Jewish Russian historian who contributed mainly to the history of Jews in early medieval Russia. Moreover, he was a renowned authority in Hebrew and Semitic paleography. In 1876 he was appointed head of the Oriental department of the Imperial Public Library. Unlike Chwolson, Harkavy was promoted to a position in the state service not at the expense of baptism but remained a prominent leader of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg. He was a critic of Firkowicz's integrity and, admittedly, a lifelong rival of Chwolson.

²³ Voskhod, №3, col. 11–17.

immediate predecessor, “half-ignorant Jewish convert [sic!] Levison,” who was said to be a former Jewish butcher (*shochet*). Chwolson’s arrival brought true knowledge and expertise. He participated in the translation of the Bible into modern Russian and was one of the first scholars to use rabbinic texts in New Testament exegesis. However, Chwolson’s top concern was to explain the absurdity of blood libel to students of theology (he gave an annual lecture on it in the Roman Catholic Academy), which then grew into his books against blood accusation and his participation as an expert witness when this nonsensical indictment was admitted into the courtroom.

Since there is no hint of the fuller biography of Chwolson in French ever written, we must admit that this series is the longest and most contextual narrative of Chwolson’s life written by one of his supporters and admirers. Even though David Günzburg gives a highly sympathetic (if not panegyric) image of Chwolson, his account is rich in detail and coherent in his case for Chwolson.

3. Günzburg’s Manuscript Source for the Eulogy

The personal *fund* of Günzburg that is now preserved in the manuscript department of the Russian National Library (former Imperial/State Public Library) contains a manuscript that is most likely to be one of the sources for Günzburg’s published eulogy.²⁴ The document is in German; it has neither title nor date. The library catalogue and the folder cover of the manuscript contain both the erroneous name “David Chwolson” and the over-cautious date “after 1880.” I am inclined to suggest that the manuscript is a draft for Günzburg’s published eulogy of 1899–1900. The published Russian text is undoubtedly an expanded and ornamented translation of a rather succinct German account. However, there is one detail that proves this document to be extremely valuable.

On l.3 verso, the narrative that had hitherto been styled in the third person (“Chwolsons Vater war ein in Wilna sehr bekannter, ausgezeichnete Talmudist ...” l.1) suddenly slips into the first person (“... einer der grössten Gelehrten seiner Zeit protegirte mich sehr als einen seinen Lieblings-Schüler. Als ich ihn zum ersten male die überraschenden Resultate meiner Studien

²⁴ OR RNB. F. 183 [D. G. Günzburg] ed. khr. 51.

mitgetheilt hatte..." etc. l.3 verso²⁵) and runs in the first person for half a page. Later, apparently in the course of revising, the same hand of Günzburg in the same ink corrected all the first-person forms (ich, mich, meiner, mir, etc.) into their third-person equivalents (er, ihn, seiner, ihm) referring to Chwolson. The only explanation for this occasional slip is that Günzburg was taking notes on Chwolson's dictation or copying earlier drafts that recorded his personal narrative. In either case, this proves that the manuscript is based on Chwolson's oral history and contains his *ipsissima vox*. This is important, for it is possible now to conclude that Günzburg's eulogy, at least in its factual and chronological outline, was informed by Chwolson's own oral transmission. In particular, it authorizes certain details, discussed below, as part of Chwolson's self-presentation.

4. An Academic Obituary by a Colleague

Unlike Günzburg, Pavel Konstantinovich Kokovtsov (1861–1942) came from the family of established Russian hereditary nobility. Like him, Kokovtsov knew Chwolson closely, both personally and professionally, from his very first admission to the Hebrew-Syriac-Arabic department of the Oriental Faculty in 1880 until Chwolson's death on March 23, 1911. In 1894, Kokovtsov became an associate professor (*Privatdozent*) and inherited from Chwolson the teaching of elementary language classes. The promotion to extraordinary professor followed in 1900, and then a full professorship in 1912. In 1903, he was elected corresponding member of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg, and full membership was bestowed upon him in 1906.

Kokovtsov was one of the pallbearers at Chwolson's funeral and on April 2, 1911 presented an obituary to the General Assembly of the Academy, which was published in June.²⁶ The style of this text differs greatly from that of Günzburg's eulogy. First, for obvious reasons, it is written from the position of an academic scholar, rather than from a national or religious perspective, and it is much more formal, albeit not unemotional. Kokovtsov's aim is to

²⁵ Orthography of the document.

²⁶ Chitan v zasedanii Obshchego Sobraniya 2 aprelya 1911 g. akademikom P.K. Kokovtsovym (D.A. Chwolson. 1819–1911. Obituary. Presented to the meeting of the General Assembly on 2 April 1911 by P.K. Kokovtsov), *Izvestiya Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk* (Bulletin of the Imperial Academy of Sciences / Bulletin de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St.-Petersbourg) 10 (1911), pp.741–750.

delineate Chwolson's position among the great Orientalists of his generation: Heinrich Ewald (1803–1875), Heinrich Fleischer (1801–1888), Ernest Renan (1823–1892), Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890). This selection of names includes Protestant theologians (Ewald, Fleischer, Delitzsch), free thinkers (Renan) and Jews (Geiger) who were mentors and patrons of Chwolson (like Geiger and Fleischer), or his companions in scholarly polemics (Renan, Delitzsch). Kokovtsov is peering over the barriers of religious persuasion. He pays less attention to any personal or novelistic details of Chwolson's life but concentrates almost exclusively on his scholarly work and the subjects which Chwolson had touched upon. Kokovtsov pays equal attention to each of them, discussing Chwolson's contribution to Russian biblical translation and New Testament exegesis in detail. He concludes the obituary with an important statement on Chwolson's character:

"Here, in front of us, is a life which has completely passed in incessant, selfless, and altruistic service of scholarly progress. One may say, in this sense, that the scholar has almost eclipsed the human being inside Daniil Abramovich [i.e. Chwolson – D.B.]. The author of these words had the blessed privilege of standing in close connection to the deceased, first as a disciple of a beloved teacher, then as a companion in various scholarly subjects. It is not new to say that scholarly interests imbued his entire life, and that every new finding, every discovery incited his most passionate desire to live longer, so that he might observe the future of his discipline. It was this deep interest in the purest knowledge, in the truth, that encouraged him to step fearlessly into understudied areas, and to pave there the way for future researchers, notwithstanding the peril of getting lost himself. On his way, he sometimes was mistaken, yet mistaken *bona fide* and it was his honour to acknowledge these mistakes without recalcitrance".²⁷

Apart from the scholarly work, Kokovtsov gives a full summary of Chwolson's struggle with the tradition of blood libels, and in two years he would have to stand as expert witness into the Beilis trial together with other former students of Chwolson, such as Ivan Troitsky.²⁸

²⁷ Kokovtsov, *Nekrolog*, pp. 749–750.

²⁸ Ivan Gavrilovich Troitsky (1858–1929) was an Orthodox Christian Hebraist who studied under Chwolson in St. Petersburg at the Orthodox Christian Theological Academy and, since 1884, succeeded Chwolson as lecturer in Hebrew and Biblical Archaeology. In 1913, Troitsky was an expert witness for the defense in the Beiliss trial.

Thus, Günzburg and Kokovtsov provide an integral and comprehensive image. Looking from liberal Jewish and liberal academic angles, respectively, they give the same essentially coherent picture of a great mind and a brilliant scholar. The St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy Archive preserved these two unpublished biographies of Chwolson. Both manuscripts are undated but can be easily placed within a short interval of time.

5. Unpublished Encyclopaedia Entry by the Colleague

There is another biography of Chwolson autographed by Pavel Kokovtsov, entitled *Biography and list of works by Professor D.A. Chwolson. Compiled by P. Kokovtsov*.²⁹ Although undated, I am inclined to suggest 1917 or 1918 as the date of origin. The second pencilled note at the bottom of the page reads: "I ask that this to be destroyed after my death. P.K." Nothing clearly justifies such a harsh decision. However, if one looks closely at the text, it immediately appears to be a version of the above-mentioned obituary that was already published in 1911. The handwritten text follows the published version rather closely, with a few alterations, of which some are minute, others important. One of the latter is a footnote to the traditional date of birth (November 21, 1819), which reads:

"This date is based upon D.A. Chwolson's own testimony. Correspondingly, he celebrated his eightieth jubilee on November 21, 1899 and in ten years on the same day of November 21 his 90th birthday was celebrated. According to the official evidence of Petrograd University, Chwolson was born on December 9, 1822."³⁰

At the time of writing, I do not have any confirmation for the later date, but, given the customary distortion of dates of birth as a means of avoiding future conscription, it looks generally plausible and should be added as a possibility to standard biographies of Chwolson. This addition indicates that the text recycling was not an original decision of Kokovtsov and he had done a certain amount of research, at least in the very beginning. A slip of paper, written in pre-1918 orthography of the Russian language old orthography as well and inserted between leaves 3 and 5 shows further indications of that preliminary research:

²⁹ PFA RAN. F. 779, op. 1, ed. khr. 134. Neither Andrew Reed nor Shulamit Magnus have apparently seen it.

³⁰ PFA RAN. F. 779, op. 1, ed. khr. 134, l. 2.

“On the biography of Chwolson
 Lost his father around the age of 13
 (His father was a lamdan. Trader in Saffian leather)
 Lived in severe poverty in Vilna
 Studied and lived at the rabbi’s place (came home for dinner)
 Ate meat on Fridays and Sabbaths
 Three sisters, all married. Had children, nobody left, except one nephew,
 Mr Braunschweig (now runs a pharmacy in Petersburg)
 Through his wife related to the Cohn family (Breslau, Amsterdam ...).”³¹

It looks as if Kokovtsov planned to write a new text that would include biographical data and, plausibly, reminiscences of oral narratives he heard from Chwolson himself. For some reason, that proved impossible, and I would suggest that the troubles that followed the Bolshevik takeover in October 1917 provide the best explanation. However, Kokovtsov added a full bibliography of Chwolson here. Yet, once forced to submit his own reused text to the volume that was never printed, Kokovtsov apparently felt obliged to avoid its further publication, and this does perfectly explain his decision to have it destroyed. But, even in the existing form it does contain some valuable pieces of data unavailable elsewhere.

6. Fitting Chwolson into Post-1917 Scenery

Chwolson’s *fond* contains another handwritten biography of him, written by Chwolson’s grandson.³² The document is most interesting both in terms of its content and of the likely story behind it. It looks as if Andrew Reed is the only Western researcher who has ever seen it. However, as he did not consult the article series by David Günzburg, Reed erroneously used it as a primary source on Chwolson.³³

Judging by the internal evidence of the text, it is likely to have been completed between 1924 and 1927. The manuscript underwent two corrections. One, in violet ink by a less than calligraphic hand, improves the syntax, corrects imprecise wording and adds an inserted slip of paper with an extensive quotation

³¹ PFA RAN. F. 779, op. 1, ed. khr. 134, l. 4.

³² PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54.

³³ Reed, *For One’s Brothers*, pp. 36, 54, 65.

from Chwolson's book on blood libel accusations.³⁴ These sense-bearing alterations presumably belong to the author himself. Another hand has corrected some punctuation and crossed off two paragraphs, namely those on Chwolson as a revolutionary and on the fate of his archive (the latter then restored). This pencilled correction is likely to have been left by the newspaper or magazine editor; to me, it looks like an indication that the article was submitted to be published in a Soviet periodical, but eventually rejected.

The biography was written by Yevgeni Anatolievich Chwolson (1891–1960), son of Anatoli Daniilovich Chwolson and Gulda (Olga Germanovna) Chwolson.³⁵ Anatoli, the middle son of Daniel Chwolson, lived with him and took care of the elderly professor. Olga Chwolson served as her father-in-law's assistant secretary as he grew visually impaired in his later years; she read and took down his dictations. The definitive version of Chwolson's testament, drawn up on March 24, 1908, bequeathed one half of the estate to Anatoli and his wife on the condition that Olga's and Yevgeni's proprietary rights would be protected in case Anatoli died and Olga remarried. The rest was shared between Orest (1852–1934) and Vladimir (1862–1931), with no precautions for their spouses or children.³⁶ Yevgeni mentions that he lived under the same roof with Chwolson "for the last fifteen years of his life".³⁷ That presumably means that, in the year 1896 or 1897, when Yevgeni was about six, his parents moved to professor Chwolson's flat to take care of him. The testament stipulated that Anatoli alone inherit all movable property that was in Chwolson's flat, apart from the library, which was sold, and its price shared between the sons in the same proportion. By the time of Chwolson's death, his library was already moved to the Asiatic Museum, and the Academy paid its price in annual instalments. That means that, in legal terms, the professor's unpublished manuscripts and his entire archive belonged to Anatoli.

In the year of Yevgeny's birth, his father served as an inspector in one of the major national insurance companies. In 1913, Yevgeny was admitted to the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at St. Petersburg University, and by January 1917 he "completed auditing" of the full course as an irregular student.

³⁴ D. A. Chwolson: *O nekotorykh srednevekovykh obvineniyakh protiv evreev* (On certain medieval accusations against the Jews), second edition, St. Petersburg, 1880.

³⁵ Reed, *For One's Brothers*, p. 36, gives his patronymic erroneously: Antonovich.

³⁶ PFA RAN. F. 4, op. 2 (1909), ed. khr. 65, l. 20–21.

³⁷ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 15.

Apparently, he did not formally graduate. From 1912 on, he worked in the Meteorological Bureau of the Institute of Agriculture, first as technician, then as laboratory assistant, and finally, as of 1920, as librarian. In 1914–1922, he published a few popular articles on meteorology in German and in Russian. In 1923, his research institution (by that time called the “State Institute of Experimental Agronomy”) was closed, and Yevgeny became unemployed. He worked at the State Public Library first as an unsalaried employee, then as a staff member from 1923 until 1930. In April 1924, Yevgeny Chwolson applied for any available job at Leningrad University, and in July was appointed to supervise the Department of Agronomical and Applied Sciences in the university library. In 1930, he was forcefully relocated to the position of meteorological worker.³⁸ Yevgeny Chwolson survived the Soviet state terror and the war. His last job was in a district administration of Leningrad, which meant that he was unblemished in the eyes of the state.³⁹

What Yevgeny wrote about his 15 years living with his grandfather and the fact that Chwolson’s archive was kept with Yevgeny’s family sounds promising, especially as we read:

“certain details of this article are taken from Chwolson’s autobiography that he dictated to his son, my father, *there are many extracts from the article on him by his student, D. Günzburg*. But, it was mostly personal impressions of him that served as a primary source to the author, his grandson, who lived the last fifteen years of his life together with him under the same roof.”⁴⁰

The italicized words above were crossed out and replaced with the more oblique phrase “... and from the reviews of his works.” If the author foresaw its publication in Soviet Russia, this could be easily explained. First, for the purposes of the author, it could seem unsafe to refer openly to a “representative of

³⁸ L. A. Shilov: Khvol’son Yevgeny Anatolievich, in: Sotrudniki RNB – deyateli nauki i kul’tury. Biografichesky slovar’, vols. 1–4 [Staff members of the Russian National Library is science and culture], online: http://www.nlr.ru/nlr_history/persons/info.php?id=595 (last accessed 10.11.2016).

³⁹ In 1966, six years after his death, Yevgeny’s widow, who was moving out of their old apartment, offered a stack of papers to the Leningrad Branch of the academic archive (now PFA RAN). These were deposited as the personal *fond* of Daniel Chwolson (Fond 959). It is then justified to suppose that Yevgeny knew, or at least is likely to have been familiar with all the documents in the *fond*. I wish to thank Tatiana Kostina, staff research fellow of PFA RAN, for her inquiry in *Delo fonda 959* on my behalf.

⁴⁰ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 17.

the nobility,” who, in addition, had a title. Second, it may have been even more dangerous to mention *the Baron Günzburg*, whose library at that very moment was at stake in the disputation between the Soviet state and its “capitalist surrounding.”⁴¹ Indeed, almost all the novelistic content of this biography is taken, in a slightly paraphrased form, from the first part of Günzburg’s eulogy (above, text 1) that was in Chwolson’s grandson’s possession, or similarly from the newspaper clippings that make up a separate file within the same *fond*.⁴² Despite the author’s claims, there is hardly any additional information on Chwolson that had not already been published. On the other hand, all the additions centre around the main idea of the work.

“...he said some 10 years before the world war, or maybe even earlier, that ‘a European war would one day erupt because of Serbia, and Serbia will be not a cause, but a pretext to it’, and that this war is to end in revolution, adding that ‘I will not live to see it, but my children will’. He died only three years before it.”⁴³

The grandson’s narrative strategy is straightforward. First, Chwolson is portrayed as an accomplished polymath able to advise university professors from almost every field.⁴⁴ He is a keen analyst, visited by newspaper editors who strive to obtain his comment on various issues (especially “those of Eastern politics, the Balkans, India and China”) and mentions it in the next-day editorials.⁴⁵ On some notable occasions, Yevgeny modified the picture he loaned from Günzburg’s text. For the latter, Chwolson was a Jewish child prodigy who strove to understand ideas and opinions beyond the background and scope of rabbinic education.⁴⁶ Instead, Yevgeny portrays young Chwolson as a *tabula rasa*:

“18 years old, he hadn’t yet had an idea of any language, other than his native. [...] For a Jew who knows no language other than his own jargon, it is a matter of great difficulty to learn his first language on his own, without the simplest basics of

⁴¹ Michael Stanislawski: *An Unperformed Contract. The Sale of Baron Gunzburg’s Library to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, in: *Transition and Change in Modern Jewish History*. Jerusalem 1987, pp. lxxiii–xciii (repr. in: Herman Dicker: *Of Learning and Libraries: The Seminary Library at One Hundred*. New York 1988, pp. 89–110).

⁴² PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 53.

⁴³ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 14.

⁴⁴ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 15.

⁴⁵ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 14.

⁴⁶ Voskhod, № 51, col. 1606.

grammar and a dictionary in his native language. He has to master not only words, but very ideas and opinions far beyond his scope that have not a single expression in his native jargon".⁴⁷

From the modern point of view, this sounds simplistically counterfactual. Yeshiva students obligatorily mastered Hebrew and Aramaic, as a professed listener of Chwolson's childhood recollections would probably know. On the other hand, though, a mistake about Chwolson may reveal more about his descendants. However, this is an almost verbatim Russian translation of a passage from Günzburg's German transcript from the late 1890s that reads:

"Für einen Juden, der ausser seinem Jargon keine Sprache kannte, ist es überhaupt ungeheuer schwierig die erste Sprache zu erlernen, da er in seiner Muttersprache keine Grammatik und kein Wörterbuch besass. Er hatte dabei nicht blos die fremde Sprache, sondern auch die Begriffe zu erlernen, die in seiner Muttersprache nicht existierten, Grammatik zu erlernen gehörte zu den Unmöglichkeiten, da er von Grammatik keine Idee hatte."⁴⁸

That sensitive message was absent from the eulogy published in *Voskhod*. As Yevgeny surely had no access to Günzburg's unpublished archive, that striking similarity would undoubtedly mean that this *tabula rasa* motif comes from Daniel Chwolson himself. The picture of a person who self-taught himself almost *ex nihilo* into a luminary of learning and the narrative plot of a self-made man who rose due to his own persistence and nerve are thus likely to go back to Chwolson's own self-presentation in his lifetime.

Yevgeny makes no mention of Chwolson's baptism, let alone any moral difficulty of his conversion. However, he hurries to convert Chwolson again, this time into a revolutionary:

"He did indefatigably work in the spirit of the future revolution and helped to prepare ways for it. Like the revolution, he strove for the highest goal of humankind, namely to conjoin in a brotherly manner diverse peoples and tribes and to destroy centuries-old bullying and slander. He fought with the weapon that he mastered, the weapon that is straight-shooting and convincing. He fought with his deep learnedness, clear intellect and humanitarianism." (l. 1)

⁴⁷ PFA RAN. F. 959, op. 1, ed. khr. 54, l. 4–3.

⁴⁸ OR RNB. F. 183 [D. G. Günzburg], ed. khr. 51. L. 1 verso. The text is written in the old German orthography of the time.

The italicized words were crossed out by the pencil of a supposed Soviet editor and, in fact, such interpretation of what a revolutionary figure essentially was, looked deeply out of place, if not heterodox. Furthermore, Yevgeny wanted to demonstrate the deeply anticlerical inspirations of his grandfather, which made for a puzzling challenge.

We have seen that Chwolson had been teaching in two theological academies undisturbed for decades. His penultimate article, published two months before his death, straightforwardly opposed “the false idea that Jesus Christ never existed” – an idea that in the 1920s became a part of officially promoted anti-religious propaganda.⁴⁹ Yevgeny had to present the contents of Chwolson’s studies in the field of biblical exegesis as proof of his grandfather’s anticlerical stance. In an exegetical note on Matthew 26:64, Chwolson showed that Jesus’ reply “You have said that” was negative, and not positive as traditional Orthodox Christian interpretation believed. Yevgeny wrote:

“With that, one of the important points of ecclesiastical reasoning was ruined [...] On many occasions, he had to argue against Christian theologians, whose arrogance and ignorance he mercilessly castigated. Among other things he demonstrated that the church was completely erroneous in its interpretation of Christ’s trial.” (l. 12).

The double-aimed remark affirms Chwolson’s sense of patriotism and the family’s loyalty to the new cultural authorities of the country:

“He refused to sell abroad his enormous library that was carefully and skilfully collected over his long life and included many rare books (and incunabula among them) and manuscripts. *All manuscripts of his works, and all the most valuable correspondence with other scholars that included letters from Renan, are now kept by Narkompros*” (l. 16).

A supposed periodical editor crossed the italicized words out, and then restored them. The logic behind the erasure is obvious. The first sentence implied that Chwolson’s library remained in Russia in the property of the family. *Narkompros* (lit. ‘People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment’) was the new Soviet structure to replace the former ministry of public education. Mention

⁴⁹ D. A. Chwolson *Vosrazhenie protiv lozhnogo mneniya, chto Iisus Khristos v deistvitel’nosti ne zhil* (Objections against the false opinion that Jesus Christ has actually never lived), in: *Christianskoye chtenie* (Christian Reading), 1 (1911), c. 3–22. This journal was the main scholarly periodical of St. Petersburg Theological Academy prior to its closure in 1918.

of it looked like a gesture of loyalty to the Soviet government, and the phrase was restored.

Thus, Yevgeny Chwolson produced a picture that was essentially mythological. His account is indeed backed by the tradition leading either directly or indirectly back to Chwolson himself. However, under his grandson's pen, both Joseph and Daniel Chwolson were planted into a totally strange setting of revolution, anticlericalism, patriotism, and eventual proleptic loyalty to the new Soviet regime. In the context of the 1920s, this is a clear strategy of political survival.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the extended Chwolson family had every reason to feel unsafe. They belonged to the hereditary nobility after Daniel Chwolson earned the civil rank of Active State Councillor in 1878 and the Order of St. Anne First Class, in 1889. He had taught in two Christian theological academies, of which the Orthodox one was closed in December 1918, and the other moved to Poland (then seen as an enemy of the USSR). His eldest son Orest Chwolson was personally defamed by Lenin in a pamphlet that was canonized as a major source of Marxist philosophy.⁵¹ Joseph's youngest son, Vladimir Chwolson, lawyer and advocate, had served in the Senate and, as he moved to Yurjev (previously Dorpat, now Tartu) in 1891, he became an emigrant when Estonia gained independence in 1918. His daughters were married to men of the Bennigsen and Chavchavadze noble families. Therefore, Yevgeny's Sovietizing text would look naturally like an attempt to secure the position of the Chwolson family.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Sofya Chuykina: *Dvoryanskaya pamyat'. "Byvshiye" v sovetskom gorode Leningrad, 1920–1930-ye gody* (Memory of the Nobility. 'The former' in a Soviet city Leningrad, 1920–1930s), St. Petersburg 2006.

⁵¹ "The Russian physicist Mr. Chwolson went to Germany to publish a vile reactionary pamphlet attacking Haeckel and to assure the respectable philistines that not all scientists now hold the position of "naïve realism." V.I. Lenin. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Moscow 1972, p. 423. What is translated here as "reactionary" in the Russian original literally reads "belonging to the Black Hundred" (*chernosotennaya*, see Lenin, *ПСС* [PSS], 5th edition. Moscow, 1968, p. 370), that is, to a monarchist, extremely anti-semitic organization. Of course, there was no trace of any Antisemitism in Orest Chwolson's pamphlet on the philosophy of science.

7. Conclusion

Manuscript biographies of Chwolson from the St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy Archive offer limited additional information to the history of Chwolson's life. Apart from the different date of birth, as mentioned by Kokovtsov, most of the contents are mere variations of the published texts. However, the biography of Chwolson written by his grandson is a valuable source on the reception of Chwolson and illustrates the potential for further mythological appreciation of Chwolson's character and work. We knew of two Chwolson narratives – sympathetic and derogatory. Yevgeny Chwolson added a third one, which betrayed the deliberate political constructivism and illustrated the dangerous position of the Chwolsons in Soviet Russia.

We know how tragic the fate of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was in its cradle country, Germany, under the Nazis. Chwolson's heritage suffered similar moral devastation in his own country under the Soviets. Chwolson's lifelong ideals were academic integrity, pursuit of truth, public defense of the persecuted and vilified minority, and learned apologies that appealed to logic, sense, and intellect. Within a decade after his death, Chwolson's grandson had to do essentially the same, namely to defend Daniel Chwolson and his family. But the new political landscape forced him to draw far-fetched conclusions, to conceal, to hide, and to embellish.