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Winner of the 2015 Russian Literary Award
Finalist of the 2014 Big Book literary award

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In this book written in first person, Alexei Makushinsky explores the life of the fictional genius architect Alexander Voskoboinikov. It's not a traditional continuous biography though, but rather a quest novel, a ceaseless author-narrator's search for clues, fragments and details of a biography, all coming together to form a multilayered, versatile portrait of the man and his époque, the 20th century.

The book opens with the description of narrator's (obviously Makushinsky's alter-ego) first journey to Europe in 1988. The 28-years-old romantic came to Europe in search of adventures, bearing in his pocket a copy of Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister". Just like Goethe's hero, he felt to be "a particle of a large meaningful movement, in which all dissonances, as we say, dissolve at once ... in an all-encompassing, all-justifying harmony". This basic theme turns into a leitmotif of the novel, a bounding line that ties together all its personages.

In 1988 in Paris, narrator met a young fashion designer Vivian, a daughter of the famous architect, Russian émigré Alexander Voskoboinikov (known as Alexandre Vosco). When Vivian invited the young Russian to a family dinner, two men felt a deep mutual interest disregarding a tremendous age gap, especially after they discovered that both used to spend summer holidays in the same small Latvian village by the Baltic Sea. Among other recollections, Voskoboinikov mentions his closest childhood friend Vladimir Grawe, with whom he had once spent holidays in

Latvia. A story of their unexpected reunion in 1950 on a steamship going to Argentina - after living completely different lives for almost 30 years - came as a staggering revelation to the young man.

Many years later, when both Alexander and Vladimir were long dead, he decided to write a novel about their twisted destinies. From archive records he learned that Vladimir Grawe was born in St. Petersburg to a wealthy family of German origins. He had survived the revolutionary turmoil in Russia, and being a civil engineer with perfect German-language skills, was employed first by Soviets, then by Latvians, and later by Germans (when in 1941 he fell into German captivity). His ex-wife and little daughter starved to death during the blockade of Leningrad. In 1944, Grawe managed to escape from the approaching Red Army to the US occupation zone. When Americans were about to perform a forced repatriation of Russians, Vladimir first got off to Munich, and then in 1950 set off to Argentina with a group of other displaced persons. On the ship, he incidentally met his old friend Alexander, whose life was less miserable, but who also suffered a lot, living in exile after the Russian Civil War (1917-22). After his first marriage failed, Voskoboinikov in 1950 moved from Paris to Argentina, where he experienced a steep rise in his professional career. Together with Grawe, he has built an innovative bridge in the invented city of Rio-Davia, and many beautiful buildings, gradually developing his own unique architectural style. In Rio-Davia Alexander met and married Maria, a lovely young widow. In 1960, the couple and their little daughter Vivian moved back to Paris, where the famous architect died in 1988 at the age of 87.

Fictional biography of an invented character – or rather a story of research and collection of material for the biography - make a perfect scaffold, which the author fills with abundant meditations on the 20th-century culture, multiple digressions about the most important events of the époque, his own multiple reflections about entwined human destinies, and poetic images of nature.

**The essence of Alexandre Vosco's architecture is in its attempt to restore the lost link, to connect in space something that was destroyed or torn apart by time. The essence of Makushinky's Steamship to Argentine is in doing the same by means of literature. --
*Eugenia Vezhlian***

