Emma Gerstein (1903-2002), an expert on Russian 19th-century literature, saw her memoirs of literary life in the Soviet Union published in English just before her death at the age of 98. She was best known as a close friend of Soviet-era poets Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. Having outlived everyone in her generation, and having taken issue with the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam—long revered by Russian readers—she could gloat to her editor, “Longevity is the only salvation.” Moscow Memoirs—actually six different memoirs from 1986 to 1999—covers a tremendous range of material, both biographical (about Akhmatova, the Mandelstams, and Boris Pasternak) and autobiographical (such as her love affair with Lev Gumilyov, who was nine years her junior, Akhmatova’s son, and a prisoner of the Gulag for 13 years). Her highly convoluted accounts would read like a soap opera were it not for the tragic background of harassment and threat of exile in the Stalin era. The reader may struggle with Gerstein’s overdetailed prose, but will be captivated by her honest and clear-eyed assessment of life and literature in the Soviet Union. She writes with her own brand of objective authority but must be respected as a social historian, literary scholar, and witness for many whose stories have not yet been told.

To American readers, Gerstein’s social documentary of life in the Soviet Union can be seen as an interesting complement to diplomat George F. Kennan’s authoritative accounts of political life in the Soviet Union—Gerstein, the nonpolitical insider, and Kennan, the knowledgeable outsider who designed the U.S. policy of containment against the Soviet Union. They were born one year apart, 1903 and 1904, and in spite of their different backgrounds had a lot in common: Both had the vantage point of the long view, personally observing the Soviet Union from its beginnings in the October Revolution in 1917 to its dissolution in the 1990s. Both had a profound respect for the intelligence of educated Russians and strong feelings of empathy for the sufferings of the people. Both loved Russian language and literature and would have wished to be poets. And both eventually wrote their memoirs.

Emma Gerstein was born in the small town of Dirraburg (Daugavpils in modern Latvia). Her father, Grigory Gerstein, was a surgeon who moved his family to Moscow where he found work at a major hospital. He was not a member of the Communist Party, but he sympathized with the new socialist order. He was a member of the large group of secularized Jews in the medical field whom the party held in high regard. (Gerstein emphasizes the absence of anti-Semitism in the 1920s). In 1921, he moved the family of six into an apartment, where Emma would live for the next 40 years. Her many wry descriptions of communal apartment life in Moscow or Leningrad, with its claustrophobic lack of privacy and comic absurdity, represent some of the best writing in the book—worthy of Gogol, the 19th-century Russian satirist. Thanks to her father’s profession, Gerstein also had access to a gymnasium, and thence university education; but she lacked a sense of direction, was unhappy, and at 25 made an attempt to poison herself. Recovering at a sanatorium, she met Osip Mandelstam, already a famous poet, and his wife Nadezhda. This is the moment Gerstein chooses as the starting point for Moscow Memoirs and, we are to understand, also the beginning of her real-life calling as a confidante of poets. In the company of the Mandelstams she discovered a new world where poetry, literature, art, and music mattered more than all else—more even than the socialist revolution, as she would discover to her peril. From their meeting in 1928 to the poet’s death in 1938, Gerstein was an almost daily visitor, close at hand in crisis, called in at a moment’s notice, a quiet but intelligent listener.

Gerstein throws new light on Osip Mandelstam as a writer: In the early 1930s, he was so obsessed with his fear of becoming passé that he ventured into risky political verse, which issued finally in his ill-fated Stalin epigram, a sardonic caricature of Stalin as a kind of cockroach. In the subsequent Lubyanka prison interrogation, Mandelstam broke down and named the friends who had heard him recite the poem. Emma Gerstein was one of them; she claims the group escaped arrest only because Stalin thought poets could be useful to him. Stalin’s verdict upon them was “Isolate, but preserve.” Mandelstam was sent into exile in Voronezh, a provincial town in southern Russia, and again Gerstein made the 36-hour journey to keep the poet company. She describes his histrionic, even paranoid, behavior, including an occasional sadistic frenzy and the verbal abuse of anyone near him. In spite of it all, she continued to revere the poet’s prophetic genius until the end.

Decades later, Nadezhda Mandelstam claimed the exclusive right to tell the “proper” story of their life, in Hope Against Hope and Hope Abandoned. Gerstein’s friends, Anna Akhmatova and many others, regarded these memoirs as something of a shrine to Mandelstam’s memory—not to be tampered with. But Gerstein felt historic truth had been ill-served, and decided finally to publish her own memoirs to set the record straight. To the task she brought vivid memories of her own, scores of recovered letters, and new evidence from recently opened KGB files. In the last chapter of her book, “Of Memoirs and More Besides,” Gerstein reflects on the task of writing memoirs and her methods, which drew upon a lifetime of literary research and scholarship.

Moscow Memoirs (supplied with an index) can be recommended to anyone interested in Russian history and literature, and to college and university libraries.

REVIEWER: Gunlög E. Anderson is professor emerita in Fine Arts at Wilson College in Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on the creative work of women in history, the ancient world, and prehistory.