Famed for her vivid portraits and major art awards – including two Archibald Prizes – Judy Cassab has survived Nazi persecution, poverty and enjoyed a great, enduring love. Here, **David Leser** reveals her amazing story.

The art and life of Judy Cassab

It is easy to be forgotten. In this culture of ours that swoons on celebrity and youth, one might simply let the life and work of someone like Judy Cassab fade from view. A delightful woman with a prodigious talent and an epic story of love and survival to match might just be confined to the margins, to live out her days without remark, much less celebration.

That would be a shame. Apart from failing to honour an artist and her work, it would deny us the chance to recall some of our own European history, given that in Judy Cassab's story we are reminded not just of the horrors which befell so many of our parents and grandparents, but also of the kind of country this was in the 1950s, when everything seemed barren and upside down, but where a haunting beauty awaited the receptive eye, particularly the eye of an artist.

But somehow fate or a "higher power" – as Judy Cassab might like to call it – has intervened so that now, nearly 40 years after first winning the Archibald Prize (she has won it twice, in 1961 and 1968), and nearly 50 years after winning The Australian Women's Weekly portrait prize (she won it two years in a row, 1955 and 1956) we are again able to gaze at the rich canvas of a work and life still in progress.

In some ways we have her elder son, John Seed, a heroic figure in the international environment movement, to thank for that. "Can I be your agent?" he asked his 83-year-old mother recently, out of the blue, after a lifetime of having virtually ignored her work. "Yes, of course you can," she replied, thrilled but slightly non-plussed.

And from this unusual mother-son arrangement has come the first public showing of Judy Cassab's work in Europe in 21 years, one which will include her first exhibitions in Dublin, Berlin and Hungary, the country she fled 52 years ago with her husband and two infant ▶

INGVAR KENNE. FAIRFAX.

Above: Judy Cassab's 1955 portrait of model Judy Barraclough, which won the artist The Australian Women's Weekly portrait prize. Opposite: Judy Cassab today and (right) in 1961, 10 years after she arrived in Australia.

sons. "I expect it will be emotionally significant," she says, with considerable understatement. "There was so much indignity."

Morris West once described Judy Cassab as the portraitist without malice. Jeffrey Smart likened her to Cezanne. H.C. "Nugget" Coombs fell "a bit in love" with her, while Joan Sutherland wanted only to kiss her hand. It is doubtful whether this diminutive, Viennese-born Hungarian Jewess has ever made an enemy in her life, except, of course, during that most monstrous of times, when being a Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe automatically made you the enemy.

The fact that Judy Cassab managed to survive the Holocaust is still a rather staggering notion, given that millions of others perished, her mother, grandmother and uncle included. They were sent to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. And were it not for Jancsi Kaempfner, the man who was to become her husband and "gallant consort" for 64 years, she would have been deported along with them. Instead, she went to Budapest in 1943, at his urging, to study painting, while he remained in a Russian labour camp.

"I fell for him at first sight ... When he asked me to marry him I said, 'I can only marry you if you promise me you will always let me paint', and he promised."

There is so much that she owes this man, Jancsi Kaempfner, that to tell Judy's story it is impossible not to tell part of his, such was the enduring, wondrous nature of their union.

In 1938, when she was 18, Judy travelled from her home in Beregszasz, inside the old Czechoslovakia, to the town of Kassa to take part in a school debating competition. In the audience was Jancsi, a chemical brewer by profession and a man twice her age. He took one look at her and said to his friend Feri Strauss: "I am going to marry her." Three weeks later, he proposed.

"I fell for him at first sight," Judy recalls now. "I found him dashing. He had a fantastic head. Brains, wit ... I was smitten. When he asked me to marry him I said, 'I can only marry you if you promise me you will always let me paint', and he promised. The next day he said to me: 'I have decided we shouldn't get married now. I think you should go to Prague and study painting'."

Prague first, Budapest next ... Jancsi was always encouraging Judy in her magnificent obsession. "You are an artist and you will paint," he told her, because, like others, he could see her rare and wonderful gift.

Judy was 12 years old when she drew her first portrait. It was a charcoal sketch of her grandmother and it was so breathtakingly good that she decided not only must she have been an artist in a previous life, she was going to be one in this life, too. "I am going to be Michelangelo," she declared with youthful hubris.

The outbreak of World War II and Hitler's campaign of extermination against European Jewry put those plans on temporary hold. In 1939, Jancsi and Judy married in an atmosphere of terrible foreboding. Within two years, he was in a labour camp in Poland. "We knew there would be no contact," Judy was to write later. "So before he left, we chose a star on which to meet. We both kept this nightly appointment. Jancsi says this kept him alive."

A year later, she received word that Jancsi was being transported in a cattle train from Poland to Russia and the train would be passing through her home town of Beregszasz. Judy waited nine hours in sub-zero conditions for the train to arrive. When it did and Jancsi saw her on the platform, he pulled her up into the carriage.

"And then the train started to go," Judy recalls, "and we were in seventh heaven in the cattle car and I travelled with him for about four hours until the Russian border, before I jumped from the train into the snow and walked back to the next station. I didn't see him for another two years."

In Budapest, Judy began studying under the Hungarian post-impressionist, Aurel Bernath. He was to become her first great teacher. Believing she was progressing well, she brought an oil painting in to show him. It was a beautiful blonde in a fox fur. "I think it's awful," her teacher responded. "How can I describe kitsch?" Judy was devastated, but finally challenged.

"From then on," she recalls, "I wasn't allowed to paint portaits. I was given still lifes, views out of windows to do,

From top left: Judy, Jancsi and their sons Peterke (left), five, and John, seven, in Sydney in 1952; Judy working at the Devil's Marbles in the Northern Territory in 1984; Judy's portrait of diva Joan Sutherland (1976); and artist Margo Lewers (1967); Judy, 14, with her mother Ilus (left) and aunt Ami, in her grandmother's house in Beregszasz, 1934. Below: A page of the diary Judy began keeping at 12.

Portrait of Margo Lewers, 1967. Oil on canvas, 101.5 X 101.5cm. Winner, Archibald Prize 1967. Art Gallery of New South Wales. © AGNSW. Photography Brenton McGreachie for AGNSW.

but without being allowed to look at the paper. I had to draw blind. And then when I looked at the drawings I didn't recognise them. He said to me: 'Take notice of this, this is your subconscious [talking]. Use it'."

By March 1944, the Germans had entered Hungary and begun deporting the Jewish population. Within two months, nearly half a million were killed in Auschwitz, among them Judy and Jancsi's families. Jancsi's close friend, Feri Strauss, the man who'd been with him the day he met Judy, saw the writing on the wall, returned to his office, placed his yellow Star of David on his desk, and shot himself.

Jancsi decided he and Judy had to separate. He knew he looked Jewish and had no choice but to wear the yellow star, but his young wife, well, she might just get away with living as a non-Jew. In April 1944, Judy adopted the identity of her old maid, Maria Koperdak, and began working in a medical factory.

She stopped painting and began assisting the Jewish underground by smuggling medicine in her bra and helping to forge Jewish documents. For nine months, she lived as Maria, while Jancsi found refuge with two non-Jewish friends. "You are coming to us and we will hide you," they told him. "What is friendship for?"

It was now bloody chaos in Budapest. The city was under siege and burning. Bodies lay smouldering in the streets, strewn among the rubble and wreckage of trucks and houses. People were turning half-mad with hunger. Some were sitting down in the snow to die. Mines were exploding. The Russians were moving in, looting and raping as they came. Finally, inside this charnel house, Judy and Jancsi were reunited. "I leaned against him to stop myself fainting," she said later. "We clasped each other. It was unreal, unbelievable, to fill my eyes with the sight of him."

And then came her first, life-saving commission – from the communist commandant of Budapest, who had just advanced on the city with the Red Army. En route to Budapest, he had been in Beregszasz and somehow seen Judy's paintings. He now wanted her to paint his 84-year- ▶

Judy and her husband, Jancsi, in her Sydney studio, with her portrait of Justice Michael Kirby, in 1997.

old mother. "In payment," Judy says, "I got two kilos of bacon, a bag of potatoes, two eggs, two apples and a loaf of bread. We shared the treasure with friends."

When she finally returned to Beregszasz, Judy found the town intact but without any sign of Jewish life. Every single Jewish man, woman and child had been deported. Judy's family home stood empty, the doors torn out, the bathtub and piano gone. A chandelier hung from a tree in the garden. "The poor souls who survived," she said, "go back to their empty houses. They wander between borders .... The saddest wandering history ever produced."

By January 1946, Judy and Jancsi's first son, Janoska (later John), had arrived and Judy had begun renting a studio in an artist's colony on the banks of the Danube. She'd bought a new sketchbook and begun studying Picasso, Matisse, Roualt, Derain ... An entry in her diary from that time said: "I don't dare tell this to anyone, but I feel one day I am going to paint better portraits than anyone."

An afternoon with Judy Cassab feels like one of life's stolen pleasures. A living room filled with books and paintings – two Junipers, an Orban, a Blackman, a copy (by Judy herself) of a Bruegel. Conversations that turn on art and history and people of culture. A lunch setting for two with wine, cheese, salad and poached salmon. All served up by a warm and gracious hostess with dancing, smiling eyes and a thick Hungarian accent.

She shows me into a large studio, bathed in northern light, and full of more books, Hungarian poetry CDs and (is it possible?) the collective spirit of all those artists, friends and eminent Australians who have ever sat before her: John Olsen, Kevin Connor, Sidney Nolan, Joshua Smith, Margaret Olley, Jeffrey Smart, Sali Herman, Donald Friend, Lloyd Rees, Charles Blackman, Brett Whiteley, Margaret Woodward, Nora Heysen, Joan Sutherland, Peter Sculthorpe, Thomas Kenneally, Morris West ... The list is endless and one wonders – who amongst them would not have been astonished by the way their deepest thoughts, their inner lives, had somehow been transformed into colour, and onto the artist's brush?

Having found the person's colour – rust brown, red, blue, grey – she would then have looked for the portrait inside the swirling abstract while the sitter talked to her. And talked and talked. Then, perhaps, there might have been some divine intervention. "Many times, God paints the picture," she tells me happily. "Delacroix [the 19th-century French painter] wrote in a journal that a painter does what he can and then he has to turn the painting towards the wall because the last brushstroke is always done by God."

"She has painted some of the best portraits in Australia," says publisher and art historian Lou Klepac. "Brett Whiteley was amazed how much she could do in a few minutes. The lithograph she did of Lloyd Rees ... Well, anyone who knew and loved Lloyd could not find a better one. It was the inside of the man, not the outside."

Lou Klepac says that when she painted Morris West, she captured perfectly the terror he was feeling about having to have open-heart surgery the following day. Except Judy had no idea at the time. She'd just seen it in his eyes. "If a man was a murderer," Lou says, "and no one knew it and Judy painted his portrait, she would reveal the secrets up through the portrait."

"Nobody can get somebody's soul in a portrait like she can," her son, John, told me just before I went to see her. "She has the most incredible way of getting the physical likeness, but also the soul and the whole history of someone. It is kind of spooky."

"I wanted to bring the portrait back into the 20th century," Judy explains now, as we move from the studio back to her living room and take a seat in front of Charles Blackman's portrait of his blind former wife, Barbara. "Not only in Australia," she says, "but everywhere in the world they said: 'The portrait? What for when there's photography?' But photography can only depict one fraction of a second in one's life, whereas the portrait can depict from childhood to old age. I tried to bring it back to respectability as a work of art and that's why I have done all these painters ... Because they knew what I was trying to do."

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When Judy, Jancsi and their two sons, John and Peterke (Peter), arrived in Australia in 1951 they found themselves in a squalid one-room boarding house in Bondi, filled with Hungarians, some of whom were Jewish concentration camp survivors, some of whom were Nazis. In typical Australian fashion, they were all treated equally.

Australia seemed strange and alien. The rain felt different. Palm trees and firs sprang miraculously from the same soil. A night at the theatre seemed like a country charity event. There were no artist colonies, no salons or cafes for people to meet. Birthdays fell in the wrong season. Migrants with qualifications were given menial jobs. Painting was treated as a hobby.

Judy fell into the grip of nervous tension and despair. ▶

COURTESY JUDY CASSAB.

How could she paint in this aesthetic void? The beauty of a withered, ancient landscape was lost on her. She had no feeling for abstraction or surrealism. She had a husband to support and two small children. She wrote in her diary at the time: "Many women painters who marry and have babies say: 'Oh yes, I used to paint, too, when I was young. I must take it up some day again.' And they never do. I pray every night not to lose this passion."

Judy had come to Australia with an introduction to Charles Lloyd Jones, proprietor of David Jones. Soon she found herself painting his wife's portrait, making friends with a group of European émigré painters and joining a sketch club. Other commissions soon followed.

In 1955, four years after arriving in the country, Judy won the prestigious Australian Women's Weekly prize for her portrait of fashion model Judy Barraclough. The following year, she won it a second time for her painting of artist Elaine Haxton. On both occasions, her husband insisted the money be used for her to go overseas and paint. "I'd rather have a happy wife 10 months of the year than a bored wife 12 months of the year," he said.

"A new world opened up ... not a limited one, a treasure house to which it is possible to return for inspiration and suddenly my immigration made sense."

This only added to her sense of dereliction. "The guilt was enormous," she tells me. "We were very poor and Jancsi said to me: 'This money is not going into the bank, it's your going-away money.' That was where my nervous condition came from. It caused me such guilt and that's when he said: 'Don't be such a coward. Jump into the water and swim.' "

In 1961, Judy Cassab became the second woman to win the Archibald Prize for her portrait of painter Stanislaus Rapotec. Seven years later, she won it again for her evocative portrait of artist Margo Lewers. In 1969, she was awarded the CBE. She had become a celebrity, a fact that Jancsi found difficult to bear.

"Whenever I was in the newspaper, he threatened to divorce me," she says now. "That continued all through our marriage. He didn't mind reviews. What he didn't like – especially when I was young – was all the society stuff, what I was wearing, that sort of thing. He wanted me to paint, but he didn't like the things that went with it ... because he thought it diminished him. And yet he was one of the most selfless men I have ever known – staying back with the children while I went away to paint."

Commissions began to fall from the sky, and from the most eminent people: the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Peter Thorneycroft; the leader of the British Opposition, Hugh Gaitskell; the Maharani and Maharaja of Jaipur; the Duke and Duchess of Kent and their children; Queen Sirikit of Thailand ('Can I listen to the radio, Miss Cassab?' 'No, Your Majesty'); the Governor-General's daughter; Winston Churchill's niece; Sir Warwick Fairfax; Sir Frank Packer; NSW Premier Robert Askin; Margaret Whitlam; Sir Robert Helpmann; judges, admirals, chiefs of staff ... There was even a posthumous one of Diana, Princess of Wales.

A 2001 tree planting in Lismore, NSW. Judy (left), grandson Bodhi, son John, two friends and John's wife, Ruth.

And yet during these years of passage from a Bondi boarding house literally to Buckingham Palace, something else began to happen which the European-born artist in her had not expected. She began to fall under the spell of her adopted land. Her Hungarian painter friend Desiderius Orban had suggested to her that she might develop – as had he – more in the vacuum of Australia "than under all the influences of Paris". These words had failed to resonate, until she visited Alice Springs and the central desert.

Suddenly, Judy saw gentle reds, pale emeralds, burning oranges. She saw strange mountains with pinkish sides, striped marble rocks, huge ochre slabs, Aboriginal stockmen and horses which turned purple in the gloaming. She saw that Uluru was as magnificent as the Louvre, inspiring awe and fascination. She saw a country alive with colour and form. She felt the landscape embracing her spirit.

"A new world opened up," she was to say later, "not a limited one any more, a treasure house to which it is possible to return for inspiration and suddenly my immigration made sense, from a visual, artistic point of view, as well."

In 1995, Judy Cassab's *Diaries* was published to great acclaim. The following year it won the Nita B. Kibble Literary Award. Here was not only the life of the old world and new chronicled in beautiful, lyrical fashion, but the life and struggles of an artist, wife, mother, survivor and migrant as well. On the page and between the lines, you could feel the horror of war, the pain of exile, the tyranny that art imposes on those who practise it, the concern and guilt of a working mother and wife, as well as the rhapsody of love for a unique man.

"Don't worry, control your anxieties," Jancsi told her. "You are as free as a bird."

"It's this freedom," Judy told herself, "which makes me his slave."

"His [Jancsi's] judgment of her work," wrote Morris West in the foreword to Judy's book, "was the final Court of Appeal against the discordant verdict of critics and the inevitable jealousies of her professional peers. He is the

Continued on page 277.

COURTESY JUDY CASSAB.

Judy Cassab *(Continued)*

point of union between herself and her children, who like all offspring of talented people are both enriched and deprived by their parents' gifts."

Judy had been keeping her diary since she was 12, inside a blue velvet cover with a gold lock. When World War II broke out, she lost everything and was forced, during the latter part of the war, to resume writing on toilet paper.

In the 1970s, she brought the diaries out again after her elder son, John, appealed to her and his father for regular family meetings. John believed that all families – particularly his – were dysfunctional and needed to talk openly and honestly, instead of burying their love under codes of formality. Judy's diaries became a catalyst for this endeavour.

Unlike their younger son, Peter, who was to end up becoming a property developer, John had become a postman, a hippie, and then a Buddhist monk. He'd gone to live near Nimbin, in NSW, to start one of the first communes in Australia. He'd learnt to build his own house, grow his own food, study meditation and fight to save the rainforests of the world. He'd even changed his name to John Seed and had a son whom he called Bodhi, named after the tree under which the Buddha had achieved enlightenment.

In other words, he'd rebelled against everything in his background – the grandson of Hungarian intellectuals living in the Australian bush – to find his own unique place in the world.

In the process, he'd become something of a cult figure and, along the way, taught his mother much about ecology and Eastern philosophy. But there had been something missing in their relationship, some invisible, tender thread that neither of them had been able to discover.

At least not until Jancsi's health began to falter some years ago. By April 2001, he had been sick for so long that he'd exhausted his passion for living, although not for Judy. "Juci," he said to her one morning, "if there is an afterlife I will love you from there." He died that night at the age of 97.

The son was now able to step into the breach. "It seems a little bit like a play written by someone else," he says. "You turn the page and all of a sudden it says: 'John enters from stage left.' It was the same feeling when my father was getting old and I realised all of a sudden I was going to take part in making sure he didn't go into an old person's home."

He began visiting his father every month from northern NSW; massaging his feet, taking him for walks, then organising painting holidays for his mother.

"Something very primal kicked in about looking after my parents as they were getting old," he says. And it was from this feeling that the determination grew to help his mother showcase her work in Europe.

"Except this was about her, rather than her work," he says. "I don't look at paintings much. I don't go to exhibitions. It is not really part of my life. So it is not about painting as much as suddenly seeing an opportunity to do something for her. Because she's the wealthiest person I have ever known. She is so well-loved. She is such a good person that it is hard to think of anything you can do for a person like that. So to suddenly see that there was something I could do for her was a totally amazing possibility."

Judy is stunned to learn this. "It explains so much," she says and then, after a pause, "I wouldn't call myself wealthy. I would call myself fortunate and privileged because wealth implies position and I was just as privileged when I lived in one room with a bottle of turpentine and an easel."

It was this sense of good fortune that compelled Judy and Jancsi, over nearly half a century, to send money and clothes to the people who saved their lives in Hungary. And it is the same good fortune that prompts Judy to pray and give thanks each day.

"I have always been blessed with being a believer," she says. "As I get older, I believe in the power of prayer, even stronger than before. I always thank God for all I have been blessed with."

And what blessings. A lifetime with a man she loved. Two sons both healthy and happy. Friends who adore her. Gallery representations around the world. Prizes galore, including two this year for watercolours. An exhibition of her desert landscapes in Europe, beginning next month. And, at 83, still full of youthful vigour.

Will she, I wonder, be like Matisse who worked lying on his back during his last days? Or Renoir, who did his best work with brushes attached to his arthritic wrists? Or will she learn to paint – as Donald Friend forced himself to – with an untrained hand.

Yes, yes, all of the above, she says. "I would paint from a wheelchair. I would paint with my left hand ... I paint more than I ever did now because there are less and less things that I would rather do."

And have you become a better painter, I ask finally, or was Picasso right when he said that painters don't get better, they just get older, different. "I think I am better," she replies with a gleam in her eye. "I can judge better when to stop." W

Judy Cassab's landscapes will be on exhibition at the Vasarely Museum in Budapest from October 2 to November 2, at the Australian Embassy in Dublin, beginning on November 24, and at the Australian Embassy in Berlin from November 6 to December 6.