

1832 Female convicts wanted

In the Herald

Brian Yatman

Persons desirous of employing the female convicts in the Factory at Parramatta, in spinning wool into yarn for the ordinary factory cloth, from the 1st January to the 31st December, 1833, are requested to transmit sealed tenders to this office by 12 o'clock on Thursday the 22nd November. The contractor must engage to supply a sufficient quantity of wool to keep the women constantly employed, about 800lbs per week.

To the poets of Australia

B. Levy offers a silver medal, with a suitable inscription engraved thereon, for an approved opening address, to be spoken on the first night of opening the Theatre Royal, Sydney, composed and written by a native of this colony. Elsewhere, Henry Halloran sought 200 or so subscribers for a volume to include such verses as *The Discovery of Eastern Australia* and *Six Epistles from the Pen of Diana Desperate*.

Death sentence for robbers

Buchanan Wilson and William Wood were jointly indicted for a robbery in the dwelling house of Edward Waterworth, the said Edward Waterworth being therein put in bodily fear, at Lower Minto, on the 18th August. The prisoners were convicted on evidence the most satisfactory, and having been called up for judgment, the learned judge passed the awful sentence of death upon them.

Judy Cassab 1920–2015

Prized painter lived for her art

Judy Cassab – as this European migrant became upon arriving in Sydney in 1951 – was one of Australia's most acclaimed portraitists, and remains the only woman to have won the Archibald Prize twice.

According to artist Elwyn Lynn, she “went beyond the common, camera-like representations expected of portraits and revealed both the likeness and essential character of each sitter in a way that set her work apart from others”.

Judit Kaszab was born on August 15, 1920, the only child of Imre Kaszab and his wife, Ilona (nee Kont), a Hungarian Jewish couple living in Vienna. Both parents brought wealth to the partnership, but Imre's poor business acumen and Vienna's unstable post-war economy saw them almost bankrupt in a Budapest boarding house in 1929. They separated three years later but remained on good terms, enabling father and daughter to maintain a warm, if fragmented, relationship.

Judit moved to her maternal grandmother's house in Beregszasz, a region that changed nationalities several times during the 20th century, but at her time was Czechoslovakian. She showed great talent for music and languages, but settled on art. Her grandmother's portrait (among the few juvenile works to survive) shows skill and sensibilities well beyond Judit's 12 years.

In 1938, the recently graduated Kaszab took part in a debate in a nearby town, catching the eye of Count Schonborn's estate manager: intelligent, charismatic, self-made man Jancsi Kampfner. “Who is that girl?” he asked a friend. “I am going to marry her.”

Despite her suitor being twice her age, she eagerly accepted the proposal that came just three weeks later – but only if Kampfner allowed her to be an artist rather than a hausfrau. He immediately acted on his promise, insisting she spend a year studying art in Prague before they married.

These studies were curtailed when German tanks rolled into Prague in 1939. Kaszab fled home and was soon married, amid the not-so-distant sound of cannon fire, in a region that was now Hungarian. Their first year together was relatively carefree, but this wealthy Jewish couple's world inexorably disintegrated.

They were separated in 1941 when Kampfner was conscripted to work in labour camps, while the resumption of Kaszab's studies (again at her husband's insistence) were cut short once more. They were briefly reunited in Budapest when Kampfner was released in



Won the Archibald Prize twice: Judy Cassab at home among her artworks in 2011. Photo: Brendan Esposito

1944, but he soon had to go into hiding, while she assumed the identity of a Gentile, her former maid Maria Koperdak. At year's end, the 100-day siege of Budapest began, during which 35,000 civilians died and everyone suffered greatly.

After the war, the couple learnt their immediate families had died in Nazi concentration camps. They looked to the future: he managed a Budapest brewery; she started painting again and gave birth to their first child, Janos, in December 1945. Two years later, Peter was born. Janos became John in Australia and later, as John Seed, an internationally respected conservationist, while Peter became a successful property developer.

Kampfner's outspoken political views displeased the new government, the Soviet Union. Dismissed from his job in 1949, he took his family to Vienna, where they waited for Canada or Australia to accept them.

Kaszab soon discovered she was pregnant and reluctantly had an abortion; bringing a child into an uncertain world was beyond her at this time. Her painting flourished, however, and a chance encounter with London-based Hungarian designer Miki Sekers led to high-profile portrait commissions there, en route to Sydney.

The family began their new life in a Bondi boarding house crowded

with Hungarian migrants (including Jews and Nazis). Strangely, they had not learnt English while awaiting migration, making job hunting even more difficult for Kampfner, who was nearly 50.

Although funds were tight, he encouraged Cassab to pursue her passion. Sekers' letter of introduction to Charles Lloyd Jones, whose family owned David Jones, re-

Talented, beautiful and exuding European sophistication, she quickly became a media favourite.

established her portraiture career (and caused a sensation at the boarding house when Lloyd Jones' Rolls-Royce came to collect her).

Cassab immersed herself in Sydney's art scene, befriending artists such as Jeffrey Smart. Talented, beautiful and exuding European sophistication, she quickly became a media favourite, too. From 1952, when her work was included in a group exhibition, she was not only regularly reviewed, but also featured in society pages.

Cassab recognised publicity's benefits, but it was a point of contention with her husband. He believed she should focus on her

work, but there was also an element of this older man, formerly admired and successful, being in his wife's shadow. Furthermore, Kampfner had enabled her to flourish by resigning himself to running the humble surgical elastics factory he established.

Black moods were not uncommon in their long marriage, but they were always resolved. As Cassab wrote in the diaries she kept nearly her whole life (published, in edited form, to critical acclaim in 1995), her husband was “the anchor, the selfless love, security, wisdom and ... balancer of values”. The day before Kampfner died in 2001, he told her that, “if there is an afterlife, I shall love you there”.

Within a year of Cassab's arrival in Sydney, life seemed good: her career was taking off, the family had settled into a roomy Woollahra flat with a housekeeper, and the children were at school. For a year from late 1952, however, she suffered from diarrhoea, shaking and other symptoms of anxiety. They abated when she acknowledged her repressed wartime terror and grief.

Prizes came, and solo exhibitions (which numbered more than 70 in her lifetime), then, in 1957, came the first of many trips overseas to browse galleries and paint portraits. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Cassab was in demand inter-



A 1966 portrait of ceramicist Marea Gazzard by Judy Cassab.

nationally, including among British, Indian and Thai royalty.

Commissions at home, including Opera House portraits of Joan Sutherland and Robert Helpmann, were overwhelming – although she increasingly preferred non-commissioned portraits of friends, which could be more experimental. Artist friends Stanislaus Rapotec and Margo Lewers were the subjects of her 1960 and 1967 Archibald winners.

A boon for the development of Cassab's style, which balanced the figurative and abstract, and her less celebrated landscapes, was the first of numerous visits to central Australia in 1959. She came to describe it as her “spiritual home”.

Cassab became a commander of the British Empire in 1969, then an officer of the Order of Australia in 1988 (she was also the only woman, migrant and artist on the 1974 advisory council to establish Australia's honours system). In 1980, she became only the second female Art Gallery of NSW trustee.

In 2011, when she was awarded Hungary's Gold Cross of Merit, Cassab donated 400 of her works to small Australian galleries, including the New England Regional Art Museum and Sydney Jewish Museum. By then 91, her health was failing and painting no longer a daily pleasure.

Years earlier, she wrote in her diary: “My art work is so intrinsically interwoven in the fabric of my being that I cannot conceive of any sort of existence without it. I pray that I never have to.”

Judy Cassab is survived by her sons, John and Peter, grandsons Bodhi and River, and great-granddaughter Jala.

A funeral will be held at 12.30pm on Thursday, November 5, at Temple Emanuel, 7 Ocean Street, Woollahra.

Patricia Maunder