It is 59 years since Frank Auerbach first moved into his cell-like artist’s studio in Camden, North London. The rent was just £2 a week back in 1954, and there was no heating, only cold water and an outside lavatory. ‘It is still very much home. I can never imagine moving,’ he told me, mystified by any suggestion otherwise. But then Auerbach, now aged 82, the greatest living British painter, according to many critics, is the ultimate creature of habit. He has painted the same five people – his wife, son and three friends – and the same London streets for decades. All that has altered is his prices, now sky-rocketing into the millions.

This week is a triumphant celebration for Frank Auerbach in an extraordinary roller-coaster life as an artist, which, tragically, his parents never lived to see. Shortly after he was evacuated to Britain in 1943 as a young Jewish boy from Berlin, letters his mother and father sent via the Red Cross suddenly stopped. Their death in the Holocaust left him an orphan, alone in his adopted country.

Auerbach has dedicated his entire life to painting, competing with the greatest old masters to recast a new vocabulary of art in the 20th century. This week a London gallery is paying him the ultimate tribute by showing his work alongside works by Rembrandt, confident they will each hold their own. Auerbach has always been indebted to the influence of the great Dutch master.

To mark this joining of the past and present masters, Auerbach was photographed in his studio for The Mail on Sunday magazine on the eve of this show.

His method of working is unique. Each morning he scrapes off what he painted the day before and paints it again, repeating the process until he is satisfied with the picture. It can take years, and for a long time Auerbach lived on the breadline, in fear that his uncompromising stance would end in failure. Sales were few because he worked so slowly and prices for years were low.

He lived with no heating, food secondary to his priority to buy paint. It was tough and at times lonely as success crept up on him. There was no obvious trigger point for his change of fortune. His pictures were bought by museums and discerning collectors but only in the past five years have his prices jumped, as his unique contribution to art seems more obvious.

Now there is a growing expectation for him to be given a retrospective at the Tate Gallery. His figurative, obsessive portraits and his cityscapes of Primrose Hill and Camden are as defining of 20th century London as Hockney’s palm trees and swimming pools are of Los Angeles: they have an iconic intensity.

Now in his ninth decade, his ambition is undimmed. But age has altered the physical effort of painting: ‘It becomes more difficult. Energy declines and so too the effort to get going; it becomes harder. Francis Bacon used to say it is an old man’s game and so it is in a way. The very greatest painters have been people who became better in old age. For me the process has never been anything other than uncomfortable, but with the ambition of doing something that is a little bit special. It keeps one on one’s toes. I have been uneasy for the past 60 years as a result. I have always made very heavy work of it and I always found it pretty difficult.’