Rudi Adam – a big tree has fallen

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With the death of Rudi Adam a big tree in the South African bonsai forest has fallen.

He has taught so many of us so much over such a long time it is difficult to try and find the right words to honour him. Over the past year he really suffered and whilst Pat looked after him so well he often admitted to me that he wouldn’t mind going.

Ten days ago he came to the opening of the show at Babylonstoren where some of his trees were on display. He said he was not feeling well but that he was honoured to be part of the exhibition.

“I hope when I am gone people will remember me by the olive with three fronts, the olive on the cover of my book and how I have tried to interpret this fantastic art. I just hope the roots that I have tried to plant will flourish in generations to come,” he said.

Rudi throws a long shadow over the history of bonsai in the Cape and South Africa and was a pupil of Bernard Coetzee. In 2014 he was awarded a certificate from the South African Bonsai Association for lifelong achievement.

He started bonsai in 1970 and established with his wife Pat a nursery for bonsai where people were also taught in the art. He takes a bow to John Naka who visited South Africa in 1980 and helped Rudi name his nursery Olive Grove that – depending on the way the word is used in bonsai - is either an olive bush or place of learning.

It became a far cry from the time when Rudi grew bonsai on his bathroom roof and visitors had to climb up a steep ladder toe view them!

He is the author of two books on bonsai and has visited Japan, Europe, Taiwan, China and Hongkong. Various people remember how he used to bake for meetings of the Cape Bonsai Kai.

No wonder, he was born in Vienna and it is reported that he was nearly born in a flour bin, and learned the art of baking from an early age. It would surprise many bonsai enthusiasts to know that Rudi was also a trained masseur.

Not many people probably remember that Rudi was the man who discovered the ficus burt davyi (kango) and some other sub species in 1978 near Oudtshoorn. There were two trees with very small leaves. The biggest was 30cm high and with a diameter of 7-8cm. He reckoned the oldest was between 20 and 30 years old. They were pruned by wild animals or damaged by frost.

“Isobel Hofmeyr was so lucky to get one of the two trees – the one that looked as if it had grown over a rock, but of which the bottom of the trunk was actually fused roots. From this tree cuttings were made, some only 3cm high. At the convention in 1991 in Cape Town small trees from these cuttings were handed out to all attending clubs,” Fritz Joubert wrote in an article in the Literati, newsletter of Boland Bonsai.

“Some of the trees offspring were send to Jim Smith in Florida, USA, and from there it spread to bonsai people across America. After I gave a specimen to Ernst van Jaarsveld at Kirstenbosch with its history the name it was given was Kango, though bonsai growers know it as nana,” Fritz wrote.

With his last visit to South Africa John Naka honoured the tree with the name Kon Chow, which means steadfast. It is thanks to Rudi and Isobel that the Kango became sought after material for bonsai growers. You don’t find it at nurseries but some bonsai growers will supply them.

Rudi was a generous man with his knowledge and his time. Today I look at the beautiful Acacia Karoo and the big olive that he donated to the botanical garden in Stellenbosch and remember many great moments with him.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to sit in his shade will honour his memory and always be grateful for his huge contribution to bonsai in South Africa.