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The History of the Ben and Sylvia Odesser Award

by Robert D. Leonard Jr.

Ben Odesser of Chicago and later Skokie, Illinois (December 27, 1910 – January 9, 1990), was an active member, exhibitor, and vest-pocket dealer at several Chicago-area coin clubs from the 1950s through the 1980s, and a regular attendee at the annual ANA summer convention. Ben was interested in all coins, tokens, and medals and founded the Chicago Coin Bourse in 1962, which he conducted monthly almost until his death, but his primary loves were tokens, medals, and Judaic numismatics. A 1961 charter member (27) of the Token and Medal Society (TAMS), Ben served as an officer of TAMS continuously from 1964 until his death.

He was a member of the American Israel Numismatic Association (AINA) and the Israel Numismatic Society of Illinois, contributing three articles to *The Shekel* from 1974 through 1978. In 1981, Ben participated in AINA's Bar Mitzvah Study Tour of Israel, and on a later AINA tour, March 18, 1985 – at the age of 74! – he made Bar-Mitzvah in Jerusalem (*The Shekel* 18:3 [May-June 1985], pp. 11-12).

After his beloved wife Sylvia died of cancer in 1978, Ben honored her memory by making a substantial donation to TAMS to establish the **Sylvia Odesser Award For Judaic Numismatics and Exonumia**, presenting the first award personally at the 1979 TAMS banquet; he was the sole judge and presenter. Many distinguished numismatists were so honored.

Originally Ben's intent was to recognize outstanding exhibitors of Judaic exonumia (broadly defined – coin club "show and tell" exhibits were considered). But gradually Judaic exonomic exhibits became scarcer, particularly after the collapse of the AINA member clubs and the Greater New York Coin Convention in the later 1970s and 1980s. At some point the award began to be conferred on the writer of the best article in *The Shekel*, and in recent years this became standard.

After Ben's death TAMS renamed the award the **Ben and Sylvia Odesser Award**, continuing to present plaques from Ben's original endowment. At first Moe Weinschel headed a committee of collectors who were members of both AINA and TAMS to determine the winners, and Moe attended the TAMS banquet to make the presentation, but after his death October 16, 2001, TAMS President Cindy Grellman (Wibker) asked me, as a past Odesser Award winner, to take over, and I have been involved ever since.

On learning that the award had changed from Judaic exhibiting to the best article in a non-TAMS publication, I resolved to increase TAMS' involvement and emphasize Judaic exonomia, if possible. First having made a list of all Odesser Award winners, I established the following approach: (1) examine every issue of *The Shekel* for the previous year; (2) review the articles, eliminating any written by previous winners (only one person, Ed Janis, has ever received the Odesser Award twice, before my time – I refused to accept it a second time myself); (3) rank them, favoring those featuring medals or tokens; and (4) present a ranked list of nominations to *Shekel* editor Edward Schuman, who makes the final selection. This process has worked well.

In recent years, the TAMS Board of Governors began to question whether TAMS should continue the Ben and Sylvia Odesser Award. In fact, in 2008 the TAMS Board voted to relinquish the award to AINA, but after the vote AINA proposed to make it a joint TAMS-AINA award, subject to the approval of both boards. After some discussion, in 2009 the Boards of both AINA and TAMS voted to give the Ben and Sylvia Odesser Award jointly and split the cost, and the first such award was presented at the TAMS Banquet at the Los Angeles ANA convention. The award plaque now has two medals, one from AINA and one from TAMS, making it even more beautiful and meaningful. I think that Ben would be pleased!

Winners of the Sylvia Odesser/Ben and Sylvia Odesser Award

1979	Arnold Kagan	1995	Shmuel Aviezer
1980	Rich Hartzog	1996	David Hendin
1981	Manfred Anson	1997	Ed Janis (again)
1982	Stanley Yulish	1998	Donna Sims
1983	Alan R. Weinberg	1999	Dr. Alan H. Burghauser
1984	Howard M. Berlin	2000	Marvin Tameanko
1985	Morton J. Zerder	2001	Harold Musnitsky
1986	Robert D. Leonard Jr.	2002	Edgar Guest
1987	Julius Turoff	2003	Marc A. Randolph, Esq.
1988	Ed Janis	2004	Simcha Kuritzky
1989	Mel Wacks	2005	Dr. Samuel Halperin
1990	Edward Schuman	2006	Dr. Ira Rezak
1991	Peter S. Horvitz	2007	David L. Nathan, M.D.
1992	Dr. Emanuel Smith	2008	Ady Bar-Tov
1993	Lance Campbell	2009	Stephen Fregger
1994	Dr. Gary P. Laroff		