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## Rajs Captures The Singular Beauty Of The North Fork Sky

by Kelly Carroll

**Southold** - When famed landscape photographer and Southold resident Jake Rajs began college, he was a pre-med student with a penchant for writing poetry. One day, as he tells it, he came across a book of poems paired with photographs.

"I thought, 'that's a great idea' and I got a camera," the 57-year-old Polish immigrant recounts. "People didn't like my poetry as much as they liked my photography. I think if you pursue your passions, you'll finally find one you're comfortable with. When I picked up my camera, I felt like I was transformed."

Arriving at Ellis Island from Poland - by way of Israel - when he was 8-years old, Rajs began a lifetime of passion for capturing the landscapes of the United States. Since 1985, he has published some 15 books of his sweeping photographs, including *These United States*, *From the Clouds to Manhattan: The Hudson River*, and *Beyond the Dunes: A Portrait of the Hamptons*. Five years ago, Rajs came to the North Fork of Long Island for a book opportunity. In his search he fell in love, he says, with a woman and the towns of the North Fork, and has never left.

"I was impressed with the light here," he offered, thinking back on his first visit to the North Fork. "When the sun was going down over the Sound, there was an afterglow, a symphony of light. It reminded me of abstract expressionists. It was peaceful, calming. Those are the forces that got me out here." The fruits of that day are compiled in the 2006 publication of *Between Sea and Sky: Landscapes of Long Island's North Fork*.



On Cedar Beach, near his Southold home, Rajs regularly walks along the water. *Photo by Kelly Carroll*



Rajs estimates that he took 12,000 pictures to create *Between Sea and Sky*.

When asked about his love for the natural scene, Rajs explains that he is influenced by the transcendentalist notions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, maintaining that the health of his soul requires the natural environment. "You need the world around you without the thought of earthly possessions," he muses. "Let the environment take you over." In most of his photos, he purposely shoots scenes without subjects, because the intermingling of people within a scene, in his mind, takes away from the story of place. "With landscapes," he explained, "you step into the photograph. It's just you and what you are seeing."



As a photographer, Rajs says it's important for him to research where he lives, to look for those moments that have a certain essence, and to find the spectacular in the ordinary. Even though he has been living in America for almost 50 years, Rajs still approaches his work with an immigrant's eye, as if seeing something foreign for the first time.

"It takes a while for a place to reveal itself," he explains, estimating that he took some 12,000 pictures in the creation of *Between Sea and Sky*. "I go to a place 30 to 40 times - it takes a while for that to happen. Since I'm an immigrant, I drive all the states and see all the contrasts. I see all the different ways to reveal what makes this country unique."

On the North Fork, where, as Rajs puts it, "there's a



Horton Point Lighthouse.

relationship in the land," the photographer marvels at the beauty of the natural environment that surrounds him, and the people who nurture their own relationships with the land, the ocean and the sky. "I am drawn to farmers, people who work with their hands," he said. "Out here, the farmers, the fishermen, the cooks - they make a living through the land. I guess as a photographer I try to do the same thing."



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In the process of creating *Between Sea and Sky*, Raj's tried to structure the photos by geography, what he calls creating "borders" for his books. It took two years for the book to come to fruition, but some of his compilations, he says, could take 25 years to capture.

"I try not to overwhelm [the books] with just great photographs, but push the story along," he poses. "The photographs, they sing to you. In 1,000, you'll have one that jumps out at you. Besides photography, I spend more time editing. There is a hard critic that sits on my shoulder."

Raj's says he became a photographer because he loved the art of it, and added that many in his line of work do so because they also want to influence people. And influence them he has over the years, as he was named Best Observer of America by *Reader's Digest* magazine in 2004. In addition, he names the late Walter Cronkite as a fan.



"Thus we desperately need the help of a

photographer whose artistry has discovered the beauty of our history," Cronkite wrote in the introduction to Rajs' *These United States*. "Jake Rajs has found and glorified the profusion of landmarks that remind us of the American experience. Many of our citizens are privileged to see some of it. Few are privileged to see it all. None has so captured its magnificent totality as has Jake Rajs."



And, while he admits that he doesn't have a specific favorite landscape, Rajs offers that he likes the North Fork for its simplicity, the singular sense of walking along the water. He adds that every sunrise and sunset gives him the awareness that all days are special, and makes him appreciate each fleeting moment.

Walter Cronkite once said that Rajs "glorified the profusion of landmarks that remind us of the American experience."

"The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough." So said Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1836, and so maintains photographer Jake Rajs, giving our generation a little taste of what transcendentalism looks like.