

# KARL GROSSMAN of WVVH-TV

## Explores Sag Harbor's (Unusual) Jewish History in New Documentary



*Karl Grossman in a still from "The (Unusual) Jewish History of Sag Harbor."*

**By Tessa Raebeck, SAG HARBOR EXPRESS**

When the towns of Southampton and East Hampton were closed to them, Jewish settlers found a haven in Sag Harbor.

"Our population is cosmopolitan," reported the *Sag Harbor Express* in 1902. "There are about 650 adults of foreign birth...The Hebrew invasion, which is comparatively recent, sums up, men, women and children, about 500."

This "invasion" is the subject of Noyac resident Karl Grossman's television documentary, "The (Unusual) Jewish History of Sag Harbor," produced by Long Island's WVVH-TV. The neighboring towns were "basically off-limits to Jews," says Grossman in the film, but Sag Harbor had a burgeoning Jewish community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

An investigative reporter, professor of journalism and the founder of the environmental and social justice production company EnviroVideo, Grossman descends from some of Sag Harbor's earliest Jewish residents. His grandmother's sister married into the Spitz family, which owned the Main Street building where Fisher's Home Furnishings is today. After her sister's marriage, Stephanie Spiegel came to Sag Harbor to live in an apartment

above the building, at the time an appliance store specializing in a new technology — radios.

“She then met my grandfather here in Sag Harbor and they fell in love and all that,” said Grossman, surrounded by article clippings and family heirlooms in his Noyac home.

Grossman’s grandfather, Herman Grossman, was sought out by Joseph Fahys, who at the time owned the Fahys Watch Case Company at what is now the Watchcase condominium development in the heart of Sag Harbor. Herman was one of many Hungarian Jews who were enlisted by Fahys because of their expertise at engraving.

Due in large part to the watchcase factory’s demand for skilled labor, Sag Harbor had one of the East End’s most vibrant Jewish communities. Divisions existed, however, between the Hungarian Jews and the Jews who came from Russia, Poland or elsewhere. In his documentary, Grossman points out this self-induced segregation at Sag Harbor’s Jewish Cemetery (still at its original location at the southern edge of the village on Route 114) where there is a separate section that was once reserved for Hungarian Jews.

“Wasn’t it nuts?” asked Grossman. “While Jews weren’t accepted in East Hampton and Southampton, here in Sag Harbor there was this dopey split. That is so nutty, but it’s also probably characteristic of people, even people who are in a minority.”

The documentary originated last year, when, due to the restoration project at the old watchcase factory, Grossman was finally able to take a long-awaited tour of the building. Included in the film is a tour of the watchcase factory given by David Kronman of Cape Advisors, the firm responsible for renovating the building into a condominium complex.

“It was really impressive,” said Grossman. “It’s a trip. They could have really screwed it up, they could have just gutted it and just left. But they’re leaving this, they’re leaving that. They’re really into the history of it and some of the building materials are really special.”

The film also focuses on Sag Harbor’s Temple Adas Israel where Grossman is an active member. The oldest continuously operating synagogue on Long Island, outside of New York City, the first services in the temple — then called Temple Mishcan Israel — were held in 1898 to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. Legend has it that Teddy Roosevelt gave the synagogue its first Torah when he stopped on the East End on his way back from San Juan Hill.

Including interviews with residents ranging from 17-year-old Jessica Gruenstein to Gertrude Katz, who grew up in Sag Harbor in the 1930s, the documentary offers an in-depth look at the Jewish experience in Sag Harbor.

“It’s probably bigger,” Grossman said of the village’s current Jewish population. “We have the older generations that are still here, but then you have among people who moved to the East End — you just look at the mailboxes — there’s a good number of Jewish people.”

*“The (Unusual) Jewish History of Sag Harbor” will be broadcast by WVVH-TV50, Hamptons Television on cable channel 78, FiOS 14 and available on YouTube.*