



Photo by Kym Newborn

# DR. JUD NEWBORN

## understated

BY MARTIN BORIS

For someone so slight of build, so poised and polished, he is a whirlwind of activity. An accomplished public speaker, author, and advocate of human rights, film arts and the environment, he delivers compelling lectures on the Holocaust and its timely lessons for confronting today's terrorism and global antisemitism. Lauded by such publications as *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*, and by such institutions as the U.N., Princeton's Jewish Center and the Hebrew Union College, Dr. Jud Newborn speaks with dramatic power and a deeply felt passion that leaves his audiences both moved and exhilarated.

Even as he lectures across the country, enlightens politicians and writes for major publications, this University of Chicago-educated scholar

also pursues other important projects. He is currently working on an expanded edition of his book about the White Rose student anti-Nazi resistance, *Shattering the German Night*, which Angelica Huston has agreed to direct as a film. Meanwhile he is taking his slide show, "Today's Arab and Global Anti-Semitism," on the road, while revealing how unsung stories of Jewish courage can inspire all Americans to support Israel and democracy worldwide.



Jud Newborn was born in New York to parents who mixed political service and show business with a dedication to Jewish values. His father, Solomon, elected to public office in the Township of Oyster Bay, was a

World War II air force hero who put on *tefillin* in the barracks each day. Solomon and Rita Newborn later founded Long Island's Plainview Jewish Center on former potato fields. A professional singer known as Rita Sorel, Jud's mother had her own weekly program on Yiddish radio station WEVD, "the station that speaks your language." Before moving to Long Island, she appeared in the Borscht Belt with Henny Youngman and Sam Levinson, and more recently as an actress in commercials and Woody Allen films.

Their son attended New York University as an undergraduate, where he edited *The Washington Square Review*. Graduating Phi Beta Kappa and *magna cum laude*, Newborn left for England to attend Cambridge University. Despite some painful experiences with British antisemitism, Newborn honed his performance skills at the university's first International Poetry Festival. Joining the likes of later Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes and Miroslav Holub, the 23-year-old poet delivered his own 20-minute tour de force that was broadcast live on the BBC.

Returning to New York late in 1975, Newborn took a position at Oxford University Press. Determined, however, to devote his talents to Jewish concerns, he left a year later for the University of Chicago. Combining anthropology with history, Newborn resolved to move his field into uncharted territories by exploring the deepest secrets of the Holocaust. He derived his dissertation title from the sign over the gateway to Auschwitz: *Work Makes Free: The Hidden Cultural Meanings of the Holocaust*.

Immediately upon arriving in Munich in 1980 to begin three years of European fieldwork as a Fulbright Fellow, Newborn tells of unexpected

emotions welling to the surface, generated by the knowledge that many of his mother's family had been murdered by the Nazis. "At first," he confesses, "I thought it blasphemous that there was normal traffic on the streets—cars stopping at red and moving again at green—as if nothing had ever happened here."



Photo by Kym Newborn

At the gates of Auschwitz.

that "the Nazis did not murder six million Jews—they murdered one Jew six million times."

During this time, he also worked briefly as a volunteer covert agent for Poland's Solidarity Freedom Movement. Meeting with members of the underground, Newborn ferried information back to Radio Free Europe in Munich.

"A tiny cell of freedom," is how he describes his one-man spy operation.

Challenging though this period was, Newborn still found energy to write, in collaboration with Annette E. Dumbach, a suspenseful trade book about the White Rose. These passionate young German university students—some former Hitler Youth leaders—launched one of the most daring acts of anti-Nazi resistance. Proclaiming Hitler's mass murder of Jews to be "a crime unparalleled in

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Newborn threw himself into the project, which included hunting down former SS officers for interviews. At Auschwitz-Birkenau one day, in the gathering dusk, he scooped into a small film container some crematorium soil to bring home—only to discover himself locked in the dark behind death-camp gates. Heart pounding, he scaled the ten-foot fence and jumped over. Later, he discovered in his container the bone of a child. He resolved to keep it on his desk while writing, so as to remember

human history," these Christians spread leaflets throughout Germany, proclaiming, "We will not be silent; we are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!" In 1943, knowing the Gestapo was hot on their trail, they staged the only public protest against Nazism to take place, scattering leaflets down upon the heads of students milling about in the University of Munich courtyard. Spotted by a custodian, they were tried for treason and beheaded.

The aforementioned book, *Shattering the German Night*, was published in 1986 by Little, Brown. The prestigious *Library Journal* declared it “superbly written,” while *Newsweek* described it as “a story that commands our attention.” *The New York Times* said, “the animated narrative reads like a suspense novel.” Studs Terkel hailed the book as “inspiring, and could not be more timely.” The planned new edition will make this clear, Newborn says, with introductions by several world leaders in the works.

His renown growing, Newborn appeared on national TV news programs, “providing the sound bites they needed,” he says, “but the content I wanted.” While on the *CBS Morning News* with Maria Shriver, he was noticed by Dr. David Altshuler, newly appointed to take the helm of what would become New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage. Also noticing Newborn was Jeshajahu Weinberg, who later would become founding director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. These two visionaries recruited Newborn in 1986 to become the New York museum’s senior research, historian and consulting curator. It was his responsibility to help shape the form and content of its exhibits and ensure their accuracy and credibility.

Newborn devoted himself to the museum, then took leave to finish his dissertation. That day came in 1994, when the University of Chicago awarded him its highest honor: Doctor of Philosophy with Distinction.

In February 1996, Newborn returned to the museum to join its new team as it revived for its intensive, final construction. It opened in September

1997. By bringing in spectacular artifacts, writing articles, speaking to the media and attracting generous board members, Newborn’s work powerfully promoted the new museum.

Newborn’s lecture style has been called both ebullient and riveting, and



Members of the White Rose anti-Nazi resistance

“God’s gift is a world that is new to us every morning—and a person should believe he is reborn each day.”

he is known for his capacity to instantly connect with his audience. In one of the first programs ever held by the U.N. on the subject of the Holocaust, Newborn spoke passionately on Jewish anti-Nazi resistance. At the same time, he called upon the U.N. to finally take action against the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia’s Muslims by the Serbian fascists. His talk was broadcast directly into the Secretary-General’s office.

A dignified, yet feisty media pundit, Newborn has appeared on major TV and radio networks in the national media, while his freelance writing has appeared in top magazines

and newspapers, from *The New York Times* to *The Jerusalem Post*. Newborn’s advocacy for human rights extends also to the natural environment. Carl Ross, Executive Director of the D.C.-based Save America’s Forests, hailed Newborn’s efforts as “spectacular.”

Newborn also devotes himself to film and the arts. Since 1986 he has served as Special Consultant to the world-class Cinema Arts Centre on Long Island’s North Shore. Founded by noted cineastes Vic Skolnick and Charlotte Sky, the Cinema Arts Centre is unique in scope. It counts among its regular guests and supporters the likes of Robert Altman, Isabella Rossellini, Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., Liv Ullmann, Edie Falco, Ang Lee and John Turturro.

Despite his plans to continue his work for film arts and the environment, his commitment to the Jewish community

and to human rights worldwide remains paramount. “I will continue speaking out tirelessly about the lessons of the Holocaust for our global post-9/11 community,” promises Newborn. “Whether on stage, before TV news cameras or in books and film, I will work to get out these lessons of our common humanity. I don’t do this with desperation or fear, but with a profound sense of joy. After all, if the Holocaust has taught me anything,” he adds, paraphrasing the Ba’al Shem Tov, “it’s that God’s gift is a world that is new to us every morning—and a person should believe he is reborn each day.” [lifestyles](#)