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John Rison Jones: Holocaust Witness of Huntsville

John Rison Jones Jr. was born in Huntsville, Alabama, on March 8, 1924 (Biography), to a successful family of builders, bankers, and educators. He completed his early education at the local public schools in Huntsville (Jewish Federation) and then attended Huntsville High School until his graduation in 1942. While attending the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now known as Auburn, Jones enlisted in the United States Army on December 7, 1942, at the age of eighteen. He served as a private first class and was a member of the L-Company, 414th Regiment, 104th Infantry Division (Biography). Jones was called to active duty on May 23, 1943, and was sent to Fort McPherson, Georgia, on July 5 for training. His unit landed in France in late 1944, nearly three months after the invasion of Normandy. While in Europe, Jones and his unit fought in many “critical battles” throughout the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany, eventually arriving at the place that would change Jones forever: Nordhausen (The War Years).

On the morning of April 11, 1945, Jones and his fellow soldiers encountered a scene for which no one was prepared and where “the full horror of man’s ultimate inhumanity was revealed” (Jewish Federation). At Dora-Nordhausen, the unit discovered and liberated a concentration camp for slave laborers who worked in a massive underground facility where approximately 25,000 slaves were producing V-1 and V-2 bombs. In addition to the factory, they also found a crematorium in which a hundred individuals were burned daily. Throughout the camp, thousands of corpses in various stages of decay were scattered or stacked like wood on the
ground and in the buildings. The soldiers took in the “overbearing” stench of burning and rotting flesh as they gazed at the starving prisoners who Jones described as “bones wrapped in skin” (Jewish Federation). With their rations, the soldiers tried to feed the prisoners who were still alive; however, to their horror, Jones and his unit witnessed many of the slaves choke to death on the food they had been given. Jones described the week he spent at Nordhausen as his “most profound life experience” (Jewish Federation). He said, “I thought I had no more tears to shed. I could keep no food in my stomach for days” (Jewish Federation).

Jones returned to the United States when he was twenty-one years old, but he was a deeply troubled young man. The war had torn him apart and left him with many questions about life. He struggled with the reality of the ongoing segregated South. He said, “We went out to rid the world of evil, and we were perpetrating our own evil at home.” Jones finished his undergraduate studies at the University of the South, now known as Sewanee. He said that it took two understanding professors there to take him apart and put him back together so he could become a “decent” human. He then completed his master’s and doctorate studies in history at the University of North Carolina and as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Paris. After college, Jones began working in the historical section of the State Department and then later taught history at Washington and Lee University in Virginia and Southern Methodist University in Texas. After becoming disillusioned with curriculum education, Jones joined the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1966 and helped start a program called Upward Bound, which assisted disadvantaged youth (Huntsville Times Articles). He moved back to Huntsville in 1987 and became extremely active in the community. His list of community service endeavors include participation in The Historical Society, the Cemetery Pilgrimage, the Greater Huntsville Fund, and, most notably, Huntsville’s Museum of Art. He served as an active board member for the
museum and contributed a vast collection to the museum, becoming its largest contributor (Jewish Federation).

In the late twentieth century, a wave of “Holocaust revisionists” made an appearance and sought to rewrite history, an anti-Semitic effort to defend Adolf Hitler and deny the horrors of World War II. In 1993, two of these revisionists, local history professor Robert Countess and British speaker David Irving, held lectures at the Huntsville Public Library in a room they had rented for an evening at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH). These speakers were originally invited by the UAH Association for Campus Entertainment (ACE) for a sponsored event; however, this invitation was withdrawn once the sponsors realized Countess and Irving’s deceitful agenda. At the lectures, the speakers denounced the gravity of the Holocaust, saying that only a few hundred thousand Jews died “from all causes” rather than the widely accepted six million projections. They also claimed that the Germans did not use gas chambers during the war. Jones, armed with memories that he could never forget, attended the lecture at the library and was appalled by the lies being spread by Countess and Irving. Despite his efforts to bury his experience and pain from Nordhausen, Jones finally rose and spoke up powerfully to deny the deniers (Huntsville Times Articles). In that moment, he recognized and lived up to the truth of Elie Wiesel’s words that are now engraved over the entrance to the United States Holocaust Memorial: “For the dead and the living we must bear witness” (Jewish Federation).

Because of the strength displayed by Jones when he defended what he knew to be true, he was asked to deliver the address at the Annual Holocaust Memorial Commemoration at the Temple B’nai Sholom in Huntsville on April 10, 1994. Jones gave a heart-wrenching speech about what he had witnessed during the war and let everyone know that the horrors they had heard of were very true. After this event, Jones became more involved in speaking out about his
experiences. He was later invited to another Annual Holocaust Memorial in 2006 where he was given the honor of lighting the seventh candle, which was a symbol for his life’s work, “Bringing light into a world darkened by one of the darkest points in mankind history– the Holocaust” (Jewish Federation). Jones passed away on November 5, 2008, at the age of eighty-four (Biography). From his life, one can learn the importance of defending the truth no matter how painful or difficult it might be. Jones protected his hometown of Huntsville from harmful lies being spread among its students and citizens. His actions showed his courage, strength, and care for his country and community, which are both indebted to him for his service. Jones, in an interview with the local newspaper, said to his fellow Americans, “If your country is wrong, you’ve got to speak up” (Huntsville Times Articles).
Jones with his family; pictured in the top row, third from the left (Jewish Federation)

Jones posing with his gun at training camp (The War Years)
Works Cited


