



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H119 The International Commission on Missing Persons and an Integrated, Multidisciplinary Forensic Approach to Identification of the Missing From the 1995 Srebrenica, Bosnia Mass Execution Event

Thomas Parsons, PhD, Adnan Rizvić, BSc, Andreas Kleise, LLM; Adam Boys, MA, and Asta Zinbo, MA; Forensic Sciences International Commission on Missing Persons, 45A Alipasina, Sarajevo, 71000, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA; Mark Skinner, PhD, Simon Fraser University, Department of Archeology, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, CANADA; and Kathryne Bomberger, MA, Forensic Sciences International Commission on Missing Persons, 45A Alipasina, Sarajevo, 71000, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA*

After attending this presentation, attendees will gain an overview of the mission and role of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), and an introduction to the integrated forensic sciences that the ICMP has employed in a massive and complex effort to identify and repatriate the victims of the 1995 mass killing associated with the fall of Srebrenica, Bosnia.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by increasing the understanding of the success that can be achieved in large scale missing persons identification, and the range of technical processes and complex considerations that must be taken into account when attempting such an undertaking.

After the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and the resulting armed conflicts from the period 1992-1995, there were some 40,000 persons missing and unaccounted for, many as a result of severe human rights violations involving civilians. The International Commission on Missing Persons was established in 1996 to ensure the cooperation of governments in locating and identifying those who have disappeared during armed conflict or as a result of human rights violations. Since 2003, ICMP has been active in regions outside of the former Yugoslavia

and has played a substantial role in addressing the issue of persons missing from armed conflict and human rights violations in such countries as Chile, Colombia and Iraq, and in Disaster Victim Identification efforts such as the 2004 SE Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 Typhoon Frank ferry disaster in the Philippines.

In the former Yugoslavia, the ICMP integrates the disciplines of forensic archaeology, forensic anthropology, pathology, high throughput DNA testing and informatics to achieve identifications on a massive, regional scale. Between 2001 and August 2009, the ICMP has made over 14,700 DNA matches between victim samples (recovered mainly from mass graves) and family members of the missing, through comparison with a regionally comprehensive database of over 86,400 DNA profiles from family members of missing persons from this region (representing over 28,700 missing persons). In addition to forensic assistance, a central role of the ICMP is to promote governmental and legal structures to responsibly deal with missing persons issues and to foster justice and civil society initiatives in support of victims' families.

One of the ICMP's biggest forensic challenges in terms of complexity and scale has related to the mass killings associated with the July, 1995 fall of the United Nations' "Safe Haven" in Srebrenica to the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) forces. This event is the largest mass murder in Europe since World War II and has been designated as genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal of former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Approximately 8,100 men and boys were killed, either during flight from Srebrenica on foot across mountainous terrain, or when separated from a larger civilian contingent and systematically executed. The detainees were taken to various execution sites where the majority of victims died from gunshot wounds and were buried in large primary mass graves within or near the executions sites. In order to hide evidence of the killings and prevent discovery of the remains of the victims, over the ensuing several months the primary graves were crudely exhumed by heavy machinery and the victims reburied in multiple secondary mass graves scattered throughout remote countryside. This caused the remains of the victims to become commingled and fragmented, with the partial remains of many victims being desposited in two or more separate secondary graves. Repatriation of identified mortal remains to families thus also requires re-association of remains, as well as primary identification through a "DNA-led" process. As of August, 2009, the ICMP has provided technical assistance to Bosnian and international authorities in the assessment and excavation of some 250 Srebrenica-related grave sites and established DNA matches for almost 6200 individuals missing from the fall of Srebrenica.

This presentation will serve as an introduction to a following series of presentations that will detail the integrated forensic sciences which the ICMP brings to bear on the massive and complex undertaking of identification of the missing from Srebrenica, and associated evidentiary analysis and documentation that contributes to an objective forensic and historic record of this event. In addition, this presentation will outline policy issues that arise in large scale forensic missing persons identification from armed conflicts. Also highlighted will be how such a forensic undertaking is dependent on interactions and issues concerning victim families, family organizations, larger society, and legal and governmental structures.

Missing Persons Identification, International Commission on Missing Persons, Srebrenica