



Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

H128 Identifying the Missing From Srebrenica: Family Contact and the Final Identification Process

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The goal of this presentation is to inform attendees of the importance of communicating with family members in complex identification projects relating to armed conflict/human rights abuses.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by emphasizing the role of family members in the identification process.

The Podrinje Identification Project (PIP) was established by the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) as a centralized effort for the identification of victims of the mass killings associated with the fall of the United Nations “Safe Haven” in Srebrenica. From the beginning of the project, the families of the missing were involved in the identification process. The participation of families is vital at the outset, in order to obtain information about the missing person and obtain genetic samples from relatives to permit DNA matching. In these activities, the PIP staff members work closely with teams from the ICMP Identification Coordination Division to ensure that family members are properly informed of the identification process. To this end, the ICMP conducts public information campaigns, sponsors and meets with numerous family organizations to explain the identification process and informs them of the particular challenges associated with identifying the victims from the fall of Srebrenica. On an individual level, the PIP case managers communicate daily with family members providing information on the progress of specific cases.

Most importantly, the case managers interact with families during the process by which identifications are finalized and the identified person is repatriated for burial. This is a stressful process for families. Confirmation of their loved one's death represents terrible news, though the recovery of their loved one's remains has been anxiously awaited. To these surviving family members, the case manager is a combination of a social worker and grief counselor.

The first contact with family members informing them of identification does not occur immediately when a DNA report is received, as a case file must be prepared. Initial contact, and any subsequent contacts, can take place either at the PIP office or at the home of the family member. There are several circumstances, related to the nature of the Srebrenica event, which are particularly difficult to present to family member, including when fragmentary and commingled remains are recovered and may result in a final case that consists of incomplete remains or a small body part. In situations where further graves remain to be exhumed or examined, it is necessary to explain that there is the possibility of locating additional body parts. Alternatively, families must be informed when no further remains are expected to be

recovered, such as in situations of surface recoveries or a completed series of graves despite that the final case consists of an incomplete skeleton.

The final disposition of the identified person is exclusively the family's decision. The vast majority choose to bury their loved ones at the annual commemoration at the Potočari Memorial, which takes place in July each year. However, a few families choose to bury their relatives in family cemeteries.

A case study of a family with multiple missing first-degree relatives will be presented.

Srebrenica, family contact, case managers