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Dna Test May Solve War Mysteries In Croatia

By Linnet Myers, Tribune Staff Writer.
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The machine allows experts to amplify minute amounts of DNA, creating enough genetic material to be analyzed. The technique was used last year to identify bones from an unmarked Siberian grave as those of Russian Czar Nicholas II and his family, slain by revolutionaries in 1918. To aid in the discovery, DNA was taken from the czar's descendants, including Great Britain's Prince Philip. The same techniques can be used for other purposes, such as identification of crime suspects.

Michael Baden, a forensic expert who helped identify the Russian royal family, is a member of the Croatian mission as well. Baden, who heads New York State's forensic sciences unit, also investigated the deaths of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

The mission was organized by Stephen Skakel, project director for AmeriCares, an international charity that has brought \$45 million in medicine and medical supplies to the former Yugoslavia since ethnic war started ripping the nation apart.

Dr. Dragan Primorac, a native of Split who is now a DNA specialist at the University of Connecticut Health Center, accompanied them. So did Mitch Kennedy of Perkin Elmer, who trained local personnel on his company's machine.

The four men got off a plane in Split last Monday, went to the hospital and didn't leave until 2:30 a.m., Skakel said. The team asked four families to give blood and hair samples, a disconcerting and baffling request for parents struggling with the disappearance of their sons.

The team members "talked with the families and tried to explain to them, in layman's terms, what they hoped to accomplish by taking the blood and hair, which was obviously a difficult thing for the families,"

Skakel said. The doctors "tried to explain that the human being is made up of a thing called DNA, which is like a fingerprint, different for everybody." Once the families understood and agreed, and the doctors took the first blood samples and went back to work.

It was a painstaking job, without the advantages of a modern, fully equipped Western laboratory. "You must understand how precise you must be. There are a thousand steps," Primorac said.

By Thursday, the team was jubilant. "Last night at 4 o'clock in the morning, I got DNA from a parent's blood," Primorac said. "We got DNA. You know what that means? It worked!"

The next step is to retrieve DNA from the bones or teeth of the dead men, and then to compare the samples. The team is confident of success, though the hardest part lies ahead, since DNA deteriorates with time.