**Dafina Halili:** Greetings. I am Dafina Halili, journalist at Kosovo 2.0 and I will be with you for today’s episode of our podcast.

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On this rainy day, I am here at the K2.0 studio recording one of the first podcasts at our office in the Sunny Hill neighborhood following the gradual reopening of the country earlier this month. This is now being brought into question because of the unfortunate increase in new cases of Covid-19 in the last few days.

Lockdown as a preventive measure against the pandemic changed our routines: The way we keep in touch with our loved ones, how we entertain ourselves and how we deal with despair almost overnight. Lockdown has also affected the way citizens say their last goodbye to the loved ones they may have lost during these last few months.

The pandemic has even affected how families mourn for their loved ones who were taken from them during the war. Three months this spring, when the first Covid-19 cases were confirmed, it also coincided with the commemorative rituals and ceremonies of wartime massacres, which were committed by Slobodan Milošević’s forces.

Collective gatherings at the last resting places of murdered civilians, mortal remains found in massive graves and even the open graves that await whatever is left of 1,600 persons who are still missing, had to be limited to small groups of family members, while many other relatives have disseminated their commemorative messages on social media.

In fact, only a few days ago, Kosovo marked the 21st anniversary of Liberation, when on June 12, 1999, NATO’s initial ground forces entered Kosovo, which simultaneously kicked off the retreat of the Serbian forces.

Today, we continue going back to wartime and the postwar documentation done by hundreds of journalists, photographers and camera men from Kosovo and the whole world, a documentation that saddens, disturbs and informs us.

Such was Ferdi Limani’s documentation, one of the best photo reporters in Kosovo and the region who joins me today on our podcast to go back together once again to his work from the moment he first snapped the shutter, through a journey that found Ferdi documenting missing persons and their families who were waiting for their loved ones.

Ferdi, thank you very much for being here with us!

**Ferdi Limani:** Thank you for inviting me!

**Dafina Halili:** Ferdi, you started working for daily newspapers in Kosovo immediately after the year 2000, maybe some time in 2003 or 2004, and you have worked with various international news agencies. Often, when your biography is written down, it is said that your work reached its height when you were employed by the Kosovo government of the time to document the declaration of independence in 2008. But, I have to emphasize that I think your work reached its first height years before when you clicked the shutter button among families at the Serbia-Kosovo border in Merdare as the mortal remains of missing persons from the war in Kosovo who were found in mass graves in Serbia were returned. Most of them were found in Batajnica, Serbia, in the suburbs of Belgrade on the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ property. Today, there are still 1,600 missing people. But, before we talk about the content of your work, I would like to start with your style. All of your photographs are in black and white, this is noticeable whenever we come across your work. Why?

**Ferdi Limani:** To begin with, this is not to do with anything aesthetic, but, even historically, when photography started it was only in black and white. Now, I feel that color photography presents something more than the information within the photograph, it seizes the interest of the viewer through color, and, I cannot say that viewers are not concentrating on the event shown in the photo, but color photographs somehow reflect only the visual side of what we see, but the spiritual side of the moment cannot be felt the same way is it is with black and white photography. There's also a saying by a renowned photographer: When we see a black and white photo, we see the soul of the person in the photo, but when we see the same view in color, we see that person’s clothes. I can better explain my documentation, all the things that I document, I can get closer to the subject and the viewer when I use the black and white medium, and it is more straightforward … I don’t know, it’s more natural to me, I found myself in it. It is like asking a painter why he or she paints on canvas and not on wood, or a writer why he or she writes on a computer instead of a typewriter. It is the same thing. I found myself there.

**Dafina Halili:** When we had coffee a few days ago, you told me a story about a present that you got during the war, if I’m not mistaken it was 1998, it was a present that came wrapped in newspaper pages. Now, I do know what the present contained, but I would like you to share this with us, because it is closely connected with other stories from that time when the war had already started.

**Ferdi Limani:** Before I tell you what was wrapped in the newspaper, I will start with what happened before. It was precisely the period when the war had already started in Kosovo, there was a war and there were many casualties. At the same time, the international community, in a way, was constantly requesting more evidence of what was happening, so at one point in 1997 or 1998, there was … a large influx of journalists into Kosovo. Now, I had the opportunity to … one of those journalists, an Italian journalist who worked for a radio station in Italy, happened to rent my aunt’s house in Prishtina. And once I came to Prishtina for a few days and stayed at my aunt’s. In the evening, when the Italian journalist came back — he has now passed away, he died in the field somewhere in Asia — he came back from the field and started telling us what happened, what he had seen in Llapushnik, and so on, “this happened … the massacre … the Serbs … the Serbian police bombed a village.” In a way I was very impressed not only by his stories, but also the profession that he had, coming from a place like Italy to document a conflict — because at the time it was still called a conflict — in a completely different place. And I would ask myself why … I started becoming interested at the same time because the night continued like that, although I was young I had a glass of *raki* and we kept talking. We kept talking and I expressed to him my great desire at the time to be a photographer, as a young boy who saw the photography of his ilk in newspapers and the documentation of war crimes then was only to be found in the daily newspapers in Kosovo that we had access to, Koha Ditore specifically. And some time passed, I tried to teach myself how to take photos but I didn’t have a camera. And later, my brother who was studying in Prishtina came back to Prizren for a weekend and he brought me a present wrapped in an issue of Koha Ditore, in the pages from the newspaper, and when I opened it, there was a camera inside that the journalist had bought. No sooner had he bought it than he wrapped it up with some newspaper nearby and gave it to my brother saying: This is for Ferdi. And this was the moment when … it was not the moment when I became a photojournalist but when I was not able to go back anymore, only forward. And my parents’ means at the time were not good enough to buy film all the time and document as much as possible … but I was also very young then, I was 16 years old. But then, with time, I kept doing it.

**Dafina Halili:** Was that the camera you used to take the picture, which you posted on Instagram a few days ago, where you can see NATO forces in Prizren on Liberation Day? When you look back on that, what do you remember from those moments?

**Ferdi Limani:** The first day when we woke up in the morning and saw the live broadcast from a neighborhood close by in Prizren, I could not think of anything else other than grabbing the camera, hanging it around my neck and going to the streets. During the bombings when our whole family was in Prizren, being locked down, I tried to take pictures of the airplanes and of the bombings from the second floor … and even that camera at one point fell down and the casing fell off and half of the film was ruined. The other half was left unharmed and I continued with it. I have another unpublished photo that I took during the bombings … but anyway, when I saw that the NATO forces had already entered Prizren and were in a neighborhood somewhere nearby, the first thing I did was take the camera and go out with my school bag, and I was outside all day long. It was a very festive atmosphere. The tanks and trucks of the German KFOR … it was a type of runway, their convoy was passing through in large numbers. Meanwhile civilian vehicles with paramilitaries would pass by, and there were moments when it was fearsome, but the most terrifying moment was when a … I don’t know what you would call it, what the military term for it is, but a group of Yugoslav soldiers came closer to the crowd and the KFOR units noticed that. They formed a sort of barricade, they formed a line before them and told them to retreat. I don’t know, perhaps it was the first instinct of a photojournalist, I had a camera, and regardless of all the other, foreign reporters there, I somehow made my way between the two armies and took a photo that I shared a few days ago on Instagram: The Yugoslav army on one side and the German KFOR on the other, which pushes the former to retreat. And I feel this was the moment when I was faced not with the difficulties of fieldwork, but with the instinct to find a specific moment and the security, to calculate everything in order to be in the right place at the right moment to take the right photo. And things continued this way …

**Dafina Halili:** In fact, the history that we learned afterward was that the moment you took that photo could have turned into a crime scene because, unfortunately, we know that during confrontations with Serbian forces, be they from the Yugoslav army or the paramilitary forces and the police, many serious crimes were committed, despite the entry of the NATO forces. So, security for the civilians wasn’t established immediately when they came.

Seeing your work, I get the impression that your experiencing and getting to grips with the war and its atrocities actually occurred after it finished rather than during it. So I would like you to tell us about the events and stories that led you to document the crimes, specifically the missing persons.

**Ferdi Limani:** Well, the documentation of crimes immediately after the war, which at the time was horrifying because any time you walked in an upland road outside of the city, there was always the possibility to stumble upon a crime scene. The smell was horrific — really, the smell of that period, of the first two or three weeks immediately after the war was … I cannot explain it. But I was lucky because … the financial possibilities at the time were very limited because we had been locked down for months and during the war everything was expensive. So, when we were liberated, I started looking for a job as an assistant to a foreign photographer — a fixer, as they’re called — but I was more interested in taking photos of things that were happening those days … like what happened in Prizren. At one point, a relative of mine in Prizren called on our landline phone, because we didn’t have mobile phones back then, but she called on the landline phone and said: Ferdi, I am working with a journalist, a foreign photojournalist. He is old and I don’t really like working with him, so if you want to work with him you can take this job. And I said, sure, I’ll take it. And in the distance I heard the photojournalist tell her: Tell him to come by the hotel at 5:30. OK, I went there at 5:30 the next day. And then I realized that he was a world-renowned photojournalist, who is known even today and who has documented many, many wars, and he has a very specific method of documenting not only crimes but also war itself.

**Dafina Halili:** Do you remember the name?  
  
**Ferdi Limani:** Yes I do. He was James Nachtway, who at the time was accompanied by a documentary TV crew led by Christian Frei, who was also a guest here at Kosovo 2.0 some time ago.

**Dafina Halili:** Last year actually, at Kino Armata.

**Ferdi Limani:** Oh, so it was last year, when he talked about the films he made. At the time he was shooting the documentary film called “War Photographer” that was about James Nachtway’s work. So, I started working. Whatever they were looking for, I tried to find it. They wanted to find some family that is coming back, along the way I would stop and ask people if there is any family that had come back — anything they were interested in documenting. And in this way, helping them, helping James Nachtway, I started exposing myself not only to the fieldwork, which was like that day when I was in Prizren a few days prior when the KFOR soldiers came in, but also to the more delicate fieldwork, when we were dealing with war crime, with corpses of civilians that were left in fields, in burned-down houses … and then I noticed the more delicate side of work, and it also had an effect on me. I started to change, to be calmer … I don’t know. Every day we had to deal with more and more crimes … I was 16 years old, I wasn’t 17 yet, but it was a very important moment, especially for the beginning of my career, but also for the documentation of other events and stories that came years later that I decided to do.

**Dafina Halili:** It sounds a bit like a necessity or inevitability … that you will go back to these crime scenes years later, which you had seen when you worked as a fixer in the beginning.

**Ferdi Limani:** At that time, when I worked as a fixer — regardless of the fact that I accompanied photographers who carried out their work there — still, for me, being there, at that moment with a camera was a huge responsibility. And I couldn’t not take photos in the places we went to, so I, along with them, took photos. I learned alongside them, and I also documented things that came back to me, and I can talk to you about that later.

**Dafina Halili:** As you said this, I remembered another thing that you mentioned a few days ago, about a house in the village of Meja, where the largest massacre during the Kosovo war was committed — over 370 civilians were killed and most of their corpses were found later, in 2001 and 2002, in Batajnica.

**Ferdi Limani:** We went to Gjakova with our crew and journalists, and somebody gave us a piece of information that Meja is close by and that a massacre had happened there, we had no idea about that. And when we went to Meja, every single house was burned down. Only one house was still standing, and I remember, there was a building that from afar looked a few stories high, but when we came near it was only a mill, an electric mill that is still there. But that unharmed house — it was surprising why that house was unburned so we thought why not look at what's inside. When we entered the living room of that house, it was a crime scene. In a way, it gave a lot away from the first moment, because it was very easy to understand what had happened there from what we saw. We saw an outline of a body on the ground after the room had already been set on fire. So, somebody had killed someone there — the bullets were left there — they had killed someone and then burned the room, and when the room was burned, the only part that was left untouched was the part where the body had been left, and the mark was there. So, six or seven years later — six years later I went to Meja again when I was working with Express newspaper, and the room was a family’s living room, but, doing a story on the Meja massacre, trying to somehow illustrate it through a photo, I started walking around the martyrs’ cemetery, and then I saw a space between two graves that was empty, and it was marked with white lines, meaning that someone who hasn’t been found yet would be buried there.

**Dafina Halili:** A missing person …

**Ferdi Limani:** Yes … it was a reserved grave. It really touched me, and I took a photo and when I came back to the office in Prishtina I looked at all them and I gave them the pictures that they needed for the story. But that photograph, that single photograph made me stop and it started giving me ideas and encouraging me to continue this story, and not stop at one photograph. Although work had already been done for missing persons in Kosovo, all of them were concentrated on the forensic side — not only in Kosovo but also in other places where documentary work for missing persons was done, it was very concentrated on the forensic side. What happened later was, I used the newspaper I was working at, I started covering everything that had to do with missing persons. I was always the one who raised his hand and said: I’ll go and cover that story! And initially I started covering the repatriation of mortal remains that were coming from mass graves in Batajnica. And this always happened at the Merdare border checkpoint, in a big tent that was put there by the UN. And whenever something happened I went there, and even the family members started recognizing me.

**Dafina Halili:** If I’m not mistaken, there were about 18 or 19 repatriations of mortal remains in Merdare.

**Ferdi Limani:** I don’t exactly remember, but every month there was a handover, or whatever you would call it. So there, besides the fact that I had the opportunity to document the handover — which was an important part of the project because before I started documenting not only this story, but any story I want to document, I sit down and write a few pages about it, how I want to do it. I can divide it in a few chapters and one of the most important chapters of the story about the missing persons were the handovers in Merdare. And work there helped me a lot because through it I was able to connect with the families, which invited me, I went to visit a family in Fushë Kosovë, but at the same time it helped me to get closer to the UN forensic team, which was responsible for the handovers and the identification of missing persons.

**Dafina Halili:** How did this affect your life: Your perceptions of the war, pain, humanity and humanization.

**Ferdi Limani:** It helped me in that … it calmed me. I am very calm now, but I cannot remain indifferent toward all of these things that I can see and that I can document. If I have the opportunity to go somewhere and document a war where people are repressed, I cannot remain indifferent anymore. I can’t define this any further, but I can’t turn a blind eye anymore and say it’s not my war or it has nothing to do with my people.

**Dafina Halili:** Besides the documentation in Merdare and then in the houses of the families and their stories, you have also often been there during the exhumation of mortal remains in other mass graves within Kosovo, which in terms of mortal remains was not like in Batajnica where the remains of around 600 people were found. But Kosovo, immediately after the war and every year until independence, every month there were news about graves where they found one body, two, three, five, ten.

**Ferdi Limani:** While I was in Merdare documenting the handovers, I became close with the UN forensic team — which allowed me to document that other part when the families and the media left, whatever happened there was also very interesting. The moment when all of the white plastic bags are moved. Later they invited me to their offices in the Prishtina hospital to see the process of identification. Aside from the work at the laboratory and the morgue — imagine, every plastic bag from Batajnica, or from other mass graves outside or within Kosovo, that had to be opened, every bone there, every piece needs to be ascertained whether it belongs to a human or to an animal. Imagine what arduous work it is — I tried to summarize the forensic part as soon as possible, because I was very interested to have greater access to exhumation. I had the opportunity to cover one exhumation, but they did not find anything there. So I didn’t have the opportunity to be in a place where a mass grave was found, but I then continued with the other side, the families — in a way, the forensic side of the subject of missing persons had been covered and over-covered, and in my case I wanted to give more space to the families and to the pain, and give the most space to the anticipation.

**Dafina Halili:** I understand that, because the forensic side has great importance, almost just as important as the identification of mortal remains, knowing that the identification immediately after the war — even before the refugees came back — was often done in traditional ways. Still the forensic side is an indispensable technical part that does not necessarily showcase the clear and true interpretation of the families, and especially their emotions and experience. I think that conversations with the family members, the documentation of their stories, lets us understand how it is to be a family member of a missing person, how it is to be a relative waiting for the mortal remains of your loved ones, as compared to the forensic documentation.

**Ferdi Limani:** With a colleague from Express, we did a daylong story once: We followed a family member from Gjakova. We went to Gjakova, we picked him up and went to Merdare together with him, and we documented his journey to Merdare, the wait and his return without any news. And the wait of the family members is the most touching part of the story, which was much more important to me than the forensic part, which is naturally a very important side, but it is very technical and graphic.

**Dafina Halili:** It just doesn’t dismantle the agony of the family members.

**Ferdi Limani:** Not at all. We cannot say — looking at body parts — we cannot identify who that is. They can say names. But the wait of the families, of the mothers, the pictures of the missing persons who at the time were tied to the railing outside the Assembly building, they had their own meaning. I photographed them too, and the way that they were lost with time, their loss and how they blanched as time passed by had their own meaning. I don’t want to say that the documentary work for missing persons needs to have a poetic aspect, but, believe me, when the poetic side tries to dismantle the pain, it becomes more touching, and this is precisely what I and other photojournalists try to do: not only document and transmit information so that it is not forgotten, but also urge people to react, urge the government to react and apply more pressure so that more and more missing bodies that are still missing.

**Dafina Halili:** So, we as journalists, as media workers, camera people, photographers, photojournalists, although 21 years have now passed after the war, we constantly need to go back to such documentations: Do you think this is important to society? For people to see your work and the work of other photojournalists?

**Ferdi Limani:** We must never stop. If we stop, then nothing will be left, believe me.

**Dafina Halili:** Does this mean that your work for documenting missing persons has not ended yet?

**Ferdi Limani:** It has not ended because there are still missing persons, but even to this day we are not able to urge people in power to make explicit decisions about this issue with our work. Even to this day we negotiate about energy, water, borders and such things, but the pain persists, and the pain is the most meaningful thing, the worst thing that can happen to someone. And letting someone wait 21 years for news about their family members is … the worst thing we can do.

**Dafina Halili**: I completely agree with you. I base this on what you said earlier and my experiences as a journalist in the field with family members of missing persons — it is inexplicable, the feeling of being with them and talking, and the wait that … never ends. And they will be calm only when they have the mortal remains of family members buried in a grave where they can visit them and respect them with flowers and such things.

Ferdi, thank you very much for sharing your story of documenting missing persons with us on this episode of Kosovo 2.0’s podcast.

**Ferdi Limani:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Dafina Halili:** Thank you.