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Examining the ‘Pocket Hercules’ – Naim Suleymanoglu: His Life and Career in Olympic Weightlifting and International Sport

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Kinesiology

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Abstract and Keywords

Set within the context under which ethnic-Turks suffered seriously amidst rising communism in post World War II Eastern Europe, this thesis examines the socio-political-cultural circumstances surrounding the life and sporting career of Olympic weightlifter Naim Suleymanoglu, a Bulgarian-born Muslim of Turkish descent. This thesis examines several phases of Suleymanoglu's life, much of which was devoted to aiding and abetting a mass exodus of Muslim ethnic-Turkish community members from Bulgaria to Turkey, the pursuit of Olympic achievement, and service to the enhancement of the sport of weightlifting in Turkey. By utilizing sports platforms and his remarkable success in weightlifting, widely reported by world media, Suleymanoglu's life, in the end, translated to a new dimension surrounding the identification of Turkey in the sporting world, one in which weightlifting rivalled time-honoured wrestling as Turkey's national sport.

This study concluded that: (a) the commitment of Naim Suleymanoglu to his ethnic Muslim-Turkish heritage, (b) his defection to Turkey in 1986, (c) his subsequent Olympic gold medal successes, (d) his post-athlete career in helping to raise the sport of weightlifting in Turkey to major status, and (e) his contribution to rising Turkish national identity in the post-Cold War world, collectively underscored a life worthy of socio-cultural/biographical examination. As this study's aim is to create a historical narrative surrounding Suleymanoglu's life, a common situational biography/impact approach was used, presented in narrative/analysis character along chronological lines.

Key Words: assimilation, Bulgarization Project, communism, defection, ethnic-Turks, Naim Suleymanoglu, Pocket Hercules, Turkey, weightlifting.

Summary for Lay Audience

Set within the context under which ethnic-Turks suffered seriously amidst rising communism in post World War II Eastern Europe, this thesis examines the socio-political-cultural circumstances surrounding the life and sporting career of Olympic weightlifter Naim Suleymanoglu, a Bulgarian-born Muslim of Turkish descent. This thesis examines several phases of Suleymanoglu's life, much of which was devoted to aiding and abetting a mass exodus of Muslim ethnic-Turkish community members from Bulgaria to Turkey, the pursuit of Olympic achievement, and service to the enhancement of the sport of weightlifting in Turkey. By utilizing sports platforms and his remarkable success in weightlifting, widely reported by world media, Suleymanoglu's life, in the end, translated to a new dimension surrounding the identification of Turkey in the sporting world, one in which weightlifting rivalled time-honoured wrestling as Turkey's national sport.

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GLOSSARY LIST OF ACRONYMS

BCP	Bulgarian Communist Party
BOC	Bulgarian Olympic Committee
BWF	Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation
EU	European Union
GATA	Gülhane Military Medical Academy; Turkish, <i>Gulhane Askeri Tip Akademisi</i>
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IWF	International Weightlifting Federation
LA GAMES	Los Angeles Games
MIT	National Intelligence Organization; Turkish, <i>Milli Istihbarat Teskilati</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
TNOC	Turkish National Olympic Committee
<i>TRTSPOR</i>	<i>Turkish Radio and Television Corporation Sport</i>
TWF	Turkish Weightlifting Federation
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Chapter One

Introduction

In July of 1996, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, the history of the modern Olympic Games was embellished by a significant event—the final confrontation in the Olympic featherweight (59-64 kg. weight-class) weightlifting championship between the representatives of two of the world's most volatile political adversaries: Turkey and Greece. The finalists were Naim Suleymanoglu of Turkey and Valerios Leonidis of Greece. Suleymanoglu was contesting for his third consecutive gold medal in the event, having won in Seoul, South Korea in 1988 and Barcelona, Spain in 1992. This singular event, which Suleymanoglu narrowly won, generated some of the most vigorous nationalistic expressions from a fan base ever seen in an Olympic venue. Suleymanoglu, of the Muslim faith, is the core subject of this thesis. The circumstances surrounding the socio-political background into which Suleymanoglu was born in Bulgaria in 1967, a background under which ethnic-Turks suffered greatly in the face of rising national communism, in the end, prompted his defection from Bulgaria to neighbouring Turkey in 1986, thus depriving Bulgaria of a formidable asset in that nation's quest for international sporting recognition.

Suleymanoglu's post-Bulgarian life in Turkey, a life that included gold medals in three Olympic Games (1988 Seoul, 1992 Barcelona, 1996 Atlanta), is examined in the context of his influence and inspiration to his Muslim, ethnic-Turkish community.

1.2 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

As this thesis is situated within a historical framework, this research draws from the topics of religion, language, human rights, assimilation campaigns, and the Olympic

Games while also seeking to comprehend how particular understandings of each area created prevailing themes of communism and population movements. The primary thought of this thesis is to demonstrate how one individual athlete's life and his accomplishments influenced and inspired an ethnic community via sports, notably through the Olympic Games. In addition, this paper also analyzes the establishment of the Bulgarization Project within Bulgaria's communist-era in order to understand how the communist Bulgarian government implemented such an extensive assimilation campaign against its ethnic-Turkish citizens, which also assisted in better comprehending Suleymanoglu's post-defection journey in Turkey. The research questions are as follows:

- How did Naim Suleymanoglu's weightlifting achievements influence and encourage ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria before and after Suleymanoglu's defection to Turkey in 1986?
- What are the main reasons that led Naim Suleymanoglu to defect to Turkey from Bulgaria? What were the mechanics of Suleymanoglu's defection to Turkey in 1986 while competing at the World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, Australia? How did Suleymanoglu's defection impact the political relationship between Turkey and Bulgarian governments?
- In conjunction with Naim Suleymanoglu's defection and influence on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria, how did Suleymanoglu's defection and weightlifting achievements affect the 1989 ethnic-Turks' emigration process from Bulgaria to Turkey?

- How did Suleymanoglu perform at the Olympic Games? In conjunction with his performance, how did this give him the opportunity to promote weightlifting for youth in Turkey after his retirement as a competitor?
- What was the nature of Suleymanoglu's socio-political activity after his retirement from competing after the conclusion of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney?

1.3 Literature Review

This study extends, chronologically, focusing on Suleymanoglu's life by examining his influence on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria, the confrontation between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments after Suleymanoglu's defection, and Suleymanoglu's post-defection journey in Turkey. There is a gap in the literature as limited research has been done on these subjects. Thus, this research is broken down into three components: (1) the Bulgarization Project, (2) Suleymanoglu's life events, and (3) the confrontation between the Bulgarian government and the Turkish government after Suleymanoglu's defection in 1986. This study's components are contextualized in various literature sources.

Ali Eminov has conducted various studies on the Bulgarization Project, studies such as "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans,"¹ "The Turks in Bulgaria: post-1989 developments,"² "*Turkish and other Muslim minorities in Bulgaria*,"³ and "Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria: A brief history,"⁴ all of which focus on the role ethnic-Turks in

¹ Ali Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," *Nationalities Papers*, 28, no. 1 (2000): pp. 129-164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990050002489>.

² Ali Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria: Post-1989 Developments," *Nationalities Papers*, 27, no. 1 (1999): pp. 31-55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/009059999109172>.

³ Ali Eminov, *Turkish and other Muslim minorities in Bulgaria* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997).

⁴ Ali Eminov, "Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria: A brief history," *Islamic studies*, 36, no. 2/3 (1997): 209-241.

Bulgaria and reasons for their emigration process from Bulgaria to Turkey in the mid and late 1980s. Eminov's collections were useful for understanding the confrontation between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments near the end of the post-Cold War timeframe, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as how ethnic-Turks were treated under the assimilation campaign policies, such as through being prohibited from speaking the native-language, forbidding the practicing Islam, banning Turkish education and changing their Islamic-names to Slavic-names through force during the communist era in Bulgaria.

Two comprehensive articles that also greatly assisted me with the overall research process of this project are the works of Talip Kucukcan⁵ and Mary Neuburger.⁶ Each highlights the standards of existence as well as the living conditions of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria, particularly throughout the communist regime (1946-1990). Then, too, upon further examination of the ethnic-Turks' reaction against the communist Bulgarian government in the late 1980s, and how the communist era ended in Bulgaria, Tamer Koksall and Zakir Gul conducted comprehensive research, the findings of which are included in their article.⁷ In conjunction with the post-assimilation timeframe, this article provides a few confessions and an acknowledgment of the assimilation tactics used against ethnic-Turks; an acknowledgment that was made by the newly established Bulgarian government after the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria.

⁵ Talip Küçükcan, "Re-claiming identity: ethnicity, religion and politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19, no. 1 (1999): 49-68.

⁶ Mary Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish encounters and the re-imagining of the Bulgarian nation (1878-1995)." *East European Quarterly*, 31, no. 1 (1997): 1-18.

⁷ Tamer Koksall and Zakir Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms: Post Assimilation Campaign Against the Turkish Minority in Bulgaria/Bulgaristan'daki Türk Azinligina Yönelik Asimilasyon Kampanyasi Sonrasi Özelinde Geçis Dönemi Adaleti Mekanizmalarinin Uygulamasi," *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, 9, no. 34 (2013): 119-140.

Additionally, Ali Osman Gündüz's⁸ article helped me to observe the main reasons behind the 1989 migration from Bulgaria to Turkey, and how the Turkish government responded to this migration process during the period of the Bulgarization Project. Similarly, Emin Atasoy and Abdullah Soykan's⁹ research provided several examples of how the communist Bulgarian officials attacked ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria through the event known as the “Bloody Wedding,” and how ethnic-Turks responded to these attacks through organizing hunger strikes. Hunger strikes are one of the foremost examples for this research project as these strikes helped Suleymanoglu in order to expose the communist Bulgarian government's assimilation campaign against ethnic-Turks' through various media channels.

Furthermore, Hasine Sen¹⁰ examined the ethnic cleansing in Bulgaria during the communist era, as well as the consequences faced by the Bulgarian government. This research solidified my argument as the article provides many examples with statistics on how ethnic-Turks were assimilated in Bulgaria. Another study has been done by Ibrahim Kamil,¹¹ which examines the early stages of the communist regime's assimilation process, which led to the 1950-1951 migration from Bulgaria to Turkey. Similar to Hasine Sen's

⁸ Ali Osman Gündüz, "Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Türk Göçü/Migration of Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey (1989 Örneği/Example)," *Kırklareli Üniversitesi Balkan Araştırmaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*, (2013): 1-9.

⁹ Emin Atasoy and Abdullah Soykan, "Freedom walk of the Turks in Bulgaria: Events of May in 1989 and their reflections," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 19 (2011): 112-120.

¹⁰ Hasine Şen, "Bulgaristan Türk Öyküsünde Türk Aydını Ve Etnik Temizlik Süreci/Turkish Intellectual and Ethnic Cleansing Process in the Turkish Story in Bulgaria," *TURAN-SAM*, 9, no. 36 (2017): 89-96.

¹¹ Ibrahim Kamil, "Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Gerçekleşen 1950-1951 Göçünün Nedenleri/the Reasons of 1950-1951 Migrations towards Turkey from Bulgaria," *Balkan Araştırma Enstitüsü Dergisi-Trakya Üniversitesi*, 5, no. 2 (2016): 31-65.

and Ibrahim Kamil's articles, Darina Vasileva conducted a study entitled "Bulgarian Turkish emigration and return,"¹² which also served to benefit the overall research.

There are also additional sources that I analyzed to gain more of an analytical perspective of the Olympic Games themselves. Firstly, the book *Selling the Five Rings*¹³ by Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, and Scott G. Martyn highlights the Olympic Games' financial implications. Secondly, the book *The Gold in The Rings*¹⁴ by Stephen R. Wenn and Robert K. Barney treats extensions of that subject matter. Both books allowed me to gain an historical perspective on the Cold-War, the Olympic Games under the post-Cold-War era, and the Olympic Movement. Another source to be used is *Five Rings Over Korea*¹⁵ by Richard W. Pound. Although this source highlights the negotiation process of the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, there is still relevant information that assisted with forming a bigger picture around the Olympics.

Several books were published that cover Suleymanoglu's life events partially. For instance, journalist Tayfun Bayindir's¹⁶ book is written from a journalist's viewpoint, which means Bayindir followed Suleymanoglu from one tournament to another tournament in order to conduct interview sessions with him. Ultimately, this source provides numerous transparent interview speeches and insights between Suleymanoglu and Bayindir as they established a close relationship with each other over time. With a

¹² Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish emigration and return," *International migration review*, 26, no. 2 (1992): 342-352.

¹³ Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Stephen R. Wenn and Robert K. Barney, *The Gold in the Rings: the People and Events That Transformed the Olympic Games* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Richard W. Pound, *Five Rings Over Korea: The Secret Negotiations Behind the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1994).

¹⁶ Tayfun Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules* (Istanbul/Turkey: A7 Kitap Yayincilik, 2018).

similar approach, Suleymanoglu's weightlifting coach, Enver Turkileri¹⁷ in Bulgaria and Turkey, published a book that describes the following: a) how Suleymanoglu was discovered in Bulgaria, b) Suleymanoglu's training programs, c) Suleymanoglu's performance in major tournaments for Bulgaria before his defection, and d) Suleymanoglu's relationship with his coaching staff and teammates. Another example, an author by the name of Tufan Turenc,¹⁸ published a book that clarifies how Suleymanoglu defected to Turkey. Although highlighted books partially cover the events of Suleymanoglu's life, Bayindir's book only includes the post-defection events in Suleymanoglu's, while Turkileri and Turenc's books cover the pre-defection events. None of these books provide an in-depth analysis of the socio-political circumstances surrounding Suleymanoglu's life and his sporting events, nor the Bulgarization Project.

Regarding Suleymanoglu's performance and his achievements at the Olympic Games, I used the Olympic World Library's digital collection platform to access the official report of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games,¹⁹ the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games,²⁰ the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games,²¹ and the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games,²² the four Olympic editions in which Suleymanoglu competed. I also contacted the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF) to obtain access to relevant sources for this study. The

¹⁷ Enver Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu-The Pocket Hercules*, translated by Erdogan Guleri, edited by Lou Demarco and Andrew Charniga (Michigan: Sportivny Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Tufan Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu:Ozgurluge Ucan Dev/The Giant Flying to Freedom* (Istanbul/Turkey: MD Basim, 2020).

¹⁹ *Games of the 24th Olympiad, Seoul 1988 : the Abridged Official Report* (Seoul, Korea: Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee, 1989).

²⁰ *Official souvenir program : Games of the XXV Olympiad = Programme officiel : les Jeux de la XXVème Olympiade* (Barcelona/Spain: COOB '92, 1992).

²¹ *The official report of the Centennial Olympic Games / the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games* (Atlanta/GA: Peachtree, 1997).

²² *Official Report of the XXVII Olympiad / Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games*, (Sydney/N.S.W.: SOCOG, 2001).

Federation provided me with a published book on Suleymanoglu's memoirs written by the President of the TWF, Tamer Taspinar (2013-present).²³

In addition to the literature, a few local media channels in Turkey conducted interview sessions with Suleymanoglu, such as *OdaTV* and the *Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT)*. I accessed these interviews via [youtube.com/OdaTV](https://www.youtube.com/OdaTV)²⁴ and [youtube.com/TRTSPOR](https://www.youtube.com/TRTSPOR)²⁵ channels. Both interview sessions constitute a critical part for this thesis research as they contain chronological events that transpired in Suleymanoglu's life. For the first interview, it clarifies; (a) the motivations behind Suleymanoglu's defection from Bulgaria to Turkey, (b) how the Turkish Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, and Turkish Intelligence Organization (in Turkish: *Milli Istihbarat Teskilati*, MIT) became involved in this defection, (c) how much money Turkey paid to the Bulgarian government for Suleymanoglu's weightlifting "licence," (d) the details of the correspondence between the Bulgarian government and Turkish government after Suleymanoglu's defection, (e) how Suleymanoglu competed in the Olympics for Turkey, and (f) Suleymanoglu's life after he retired from his weightlifting career.

After Suleymanoglu's death in 2017, *the TRT* conducted extensive second interview sessions with Suleymanoglu's brother, Muharrem Suleymanoglu (a younger

²³ Tamer Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules* (Altindag/Ankara: Ted Matbaacilik, 2019), <https://halter.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/halterkitapcik.pdf>.

²⁴ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, last updated December 6, 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzlawT6JcQ&list=LLhd7ARL60KH3JQvT0ftV_nA&index=11&t=7s.

²⁵ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtarı - 'Naim Süleymanoğlu'/The Key of Kapikule-'Naim Suleymanoglu,'" YouTube video, last updated November 20, 2018,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmoJBPLG_Sg&list=LLhd7ARL60KH3JQvT0ftV_nA&index=26.

-TRTSPOR, "Bir Omur Spor-Naim Suleymanoglu/A Lifetime of Sports-Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, last updated November 19, 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGjLG-XITKs>.

weightlifter), Rasim Arda (who planned Suleymanoglu's defection), as well as Naim Suleymanoglu's first weightlifting coaches in the early stages of his career, Enver Turkileri and Hilmi Pekunlu. The interview also included discussions with three-time Olympic gold medal winner Halil Mutlu, Suleymanoglu's close friend, Sebahin Ahmetoglu, and a journalist in Turkey named Tayfun Bayindir. Their documentary interviews clarify how Suleymanoglu influenced ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria through sporting achievements and the intricate mechanics of his later defection.

For further investigation of Suleymanoglu's chronological life journey, local and global newspapers and sports magazines helped to solidify this thesis by providing Turkey's agenda during the 1980s and 1990s. The agenda includes: (a) how the Turkish media and Turkish people responded to the assimilation process in Bulgaria, and the immigration of the ethnic-Turks to Turkey, (b) how Suleymanoglu was introduced to the Turkish people, (c) Suleymanoglu's achievements throughout the Olympic Games, (d) Suleymanoglu's influence on the ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria and Turkey, and (e) the relationship between Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal and Suleymanoglu.

Suleymanoglu and Prime Minister Ozal²⁶ established a strong relationship throughout the process of Suleymanoglu's defection. This relationship continued to develop after the event and conclusion of the defection. Since then, Ozal had changed Turkey's foreign relations policies with Bulgaria and improved sport policy programs across Turkey. Turgut Ozal's subsequent rise to President of Turkey has also been analyzed, informed largely by the following studies: Cihan Daban, "TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE DIS POLITİKASI/The Foreign Policy of Turkey during the Turgut

²⁶ Turgut Ozal served as Prime Minister of Turkey from 1983 to 1989. With a successful political campaign, he became the President of Turkey between 1989 to 1993.

Ozal period;"²⁷ and İsmail Kurun, "YENİ SAĞ VE DEMOKRATİKLEŞME ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİ: TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE'Sİ ÖRNEĞİ/The Relationship between the New Right and Democratization: The Case of the Turgut Ozal Period in Turkey."²⁸ These studies were used to provide insight into Turkey under Ozal's leadership during and following the Cold War period. A bibliography containing the sources that I have consulted so far can be found at the end of the thesis.

1.4 Method and Sources

The aim of this study is to create a historical narrative surrounding Naim Suleymanoglu's life. Therefore, I used a common situational biography/impact approach gleaned from empirical sources, presented in narrative/analysis character along chronological lines. Thus, the project is qualitative and relied on a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Using the narrative perspective for the common situational biography/impact approach took this study one step further as I aimed to examine the events of Suleymanoglu's life and their impact on society by applying narrative theory. In other words, the approach allows me to reconstruct the social phenomena in the narrative concept, which gives an improved perspective and understanding of the complexity of social reality (the events of Suleymanoglu's life and their impact on society), the exploration and generation of theory.²⁹

²⁷ Cihan Daban, "TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE DIS POLİTİKASI/The Foreign Policy of Turkey during the Turgut Ozal Period," *Sosyal Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 17, no. 33 (2017): 77-96.

²⁸ İsmail Kurun, "YENİ SAĞ VE DEMOKRATİKLEŞME ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİ: TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE'Sİ ÖRNEĞİ/The Relationship between the New Right and Democratization: The Case of Turgut Ozal Period in Turkey," *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 9, no. 22 (2017): 358-374.

²⁹ Dominik Huber, Simon Milne, and Kenneth F. Hyde, "Biographical Research Methods and Their Use in the Study of Senior Tourism," *The international journal of tourism research*, 19, no. 1 (2017): 5, 6.

Much of the substance of this study is underscored by primary sources located in the D.B. Weldon Library at Western University, London, Ontario. These acquired sources pertain to the Soviet Union's sport policy in Eastern Europe (Balkans), especially during the Cold War and post-Cold War timeframe, and, as well, on Suleymanoglu's performance at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. The Weldon Library also provided abundant resources for the study, particularly in the form of online databases. Moreover, I used the Olympic World Library's online platform to access the official reports of the Olympic Games highlighted above.

Other consulted literary sources include local newspapers, articles, interviews, and related documents. Then, too, my fluency in the Turkish language proved valuable. In particular, *the OdaTV, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), Milliyet, Cumhuriyet* and *Hurriyet* newspaper and television corporations have extensive online platforms of its archives. The translation of Turkish-based sources from Turkish to English has been my own.³⁰ Regarding English-based newspapers and magazine articles/records, I used a diverse online-based platform such as *The Sports Illustrated Vault* and www.newspapers.com.³¹ These online archives platforms allowed me to access a wide variety of records, articles and interviews documented in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, that are directly related to this study. Each online archive provided a unique point of view on the research.

³⁰ A forward slash “ / ” has been used in order to indicate the English translation from Turkish to English.

³¹ Both *Sports Illustrated Vault* and www.newspapers.com archives possess numerous articles on Suleymanoglu, and each of them has been analyzed. Notably, www.newspapers.com has a massive collection of internationally recognized high-prestigious newspapers, such as *The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Sydney Herald, The Times*, etc.

1.5 Limitations

There were three limitations upon completion of this study: (1) the access to resources, (2) exclusion of all but English and Turkish literary sources, and (3) exclusive consideration of Naim Suleymanoglu's influence on the 1989 emigration process from Bulgaria to Turkey.

The first limitation is the access to sources. To access local newspapers, archives, and other possible documents, I arranged to go to Istanbul University and the Istanbul Technical University (ITU) in Istanbul, Turkey. Both universities have unique and sizeable libraries with archives of newspapers, records and files. Furthermore, some publications no longer exist; thus, the highlighted libraries are the only sources available for accessing the physical copies of related articles of this study. These archives are not accessible through the internet nor through any other digitalized online platform. Therefore, these libraries would normally be visited in person to request access to any files, archives, or any other respective records. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, I was unable to fulfill my research trip to Istanbul. Therefore, to minimize this limitation, I used local newspapers' online archive platforms, such as *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, and *Hurriyet* corporations and other social platforms.

Furthermore, the International Centre for Olympic Studies (ICOS) and the Weldon Library at the University of Western were either closed or had limited in-person access due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, Dr. Robert Barney provided me with access to the essential sources at the ICOS for this study. For the Weldon Library's accessibility restriction, I retrieved the essential sources by arranging an appointment with the librarians to lift the restrictions.

I used both Turkish and English literary sources throughout this study. Due to my lack of proficiency in the Bulgarian language, I am unable to use the Bulgarian literary sources to compare with neither the English and Turkish sources. However, the English literature resources have adequate academic articles that have been formulated by Bulgarian scholars, such as Ali Eminov and Darina Vasileva. This variety of Bulgarian-based scholars' academic studies allowed me to gain further analytic insight and an array of perspectives for this study.

Regarding the last limitation, this thesis only considers Suleymanoglu's influence on the ethnic-Turkish population in Bulgaria, particularly his influence on the 1989 emigration process.

1.6 General Outline

1. Introduction
2. Naim Suleymanoglu and the Bulgarization Project
 - 2-1. Historical Background of Communist Regime in Bulgaria (1946-1989)
 - 2-1-1. Religion
 - 2-1-2. Language
 - 2-1-3. The “Name Change” Issue
 - 2-1-4. The General Results of the Bulgarization Project
 - 2-2. The Bulgarization Project and Its Imposition on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria
 - 2-3. Living Under the Bulgarization Project: Understanding the Life of Naim Suleymanoglu and the Reasons Behind His Defection
3. Naim Suleymanoglu's Defection, Moving to Turkey and His Influence on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria
 - 3-1. The Defection Plan
 - 3-2. Post-Defection and the Conflict between the Turkish and Bulgarian Governments
 - 3-3. Naim Suleymanoglu's Influence on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria
 - 3-3-1. The 1989 Emigration Process from Bulgaria to Turkey
 - 3-3-2. Naim Suleymanoglu’s Effect on the 1989 Exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey
 - 3-3-3. The Results of the Bulgarization Project
 - 3-3-3-1. Healing Process
4. Naim Suleymanoglu in the Olympics
 - 4-1. Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games
 - 4-2. Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympic Games

- 4-3. Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games
- 5. A Less Than Glorious Ending
 - 5-1. Naim Suleymanoglu at the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games
 - 5-2. Post-Retirement Journey
 - 5.2.1 Promoting Weightlifting Sport Among Youth
 - 5.2.2 Attempting to Live the Political Life
 - 5.3. The Death of Naim Suleymanoglu
 - 5-4. Conclusion

1.7 Organization of Chapters

Chapter 2: Naim Suleymanoglu and the Bulgarization Project

This portion of the thesis is divided into three segments. The first segment provides a brief historical overview of the communist regime in Bulgaria. During the late 18th and much of the 19th centuries, prior to, and consequent with, the French Revolution (1789-1799), the Ottoman Empire gradually relinquished its religious, political, and economic dominance of the lands between the Adriatic and Black Seas, known collectively as the Balkans. One after the other, newly independent Balkan states rose to take their place in the world's community of nations. One such new state was Bulgaria. The establishment of the Bulgarian government took place in 1878. Much later, following a military coup, Todor Zhivkov rose to become the President of Bulgaria and headed the Bulgarian Communist Party (1954-89). By the late 1940s, Bulgaria was firmly lodged in the family of Eastern European nations that collectively became known to the world as the Soviet Bloc, immersed in what most have named the post-World War II half-century "Cold War" between the communist East and capitalist West.

The second segment features the same structure but focuses instead on the Bulgarization Project that was carried out by Bulgaria against its ethnic-Turks in the 1980s. Under the communist regime, ethnic-Turks were targeted by the communist

Bulgarian government. The Bulgarization Project included the enforcement of name changes, forbade the speaking of native and dialectic languages, and banned religious practices. Throughout the duration of the communist regime's rule in Bulgaria, emigration and immigration were prohibited. Movement in and out of the country was closely monitored and controlled, particularly with regard to individuals whose value to the regime was evident. Such “pawns” were not allowed to migrate from Bulgaria, much less travel abroad without severe restrictions and supervision being imposed.

These two segments showcase a historical, multi-faceted background in order to understand Suleymanoglu's childhood and his living conditions under the communist regime in Bulgaria. Additionally, the first two segments serve to transition from the narration portion of this chapter to the analytical section that predominates in the thesis.

The third segment serves to understand the reality for one significant teenager living under Bulgarian rule, Naim Suleymanoglu. The regime's control pushed Suleymanoglu over the edge and led him to entertain a startling initiative—defection in 1986. However, prior to Suleymanoglu's attempt to defect, he had to deal with and face Bulgaria's assimilation campaigns. The communist Bulgarian government viewed ethnic-Turks as a national enemy due to the Ottoman Empire's previous foreign and immigration policies in the Balkans. Under these conditions, Suleymanoglu became a voice for ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria as he began to gain precedence at the international stage of competitive weightlifting. Suleymanoglu's achievements inspired ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to fight to maintain their cultural heritage and fundamental human rights.

Most of the third segment comprises the same sources as the second; however, this segment contains a more in-depth analysis. Chapter 2 concludes with an investigative

focus on the reasons for Suleymanoglu's defection and his preparations to defect to Turkey from Bulgaria.

Chapter 3: Naim Suleymanoglu's Defection, Moving to Turkey and His Influence on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria

This Chapter is divided into three chronological segments: (1) detailing and analyzing the most examined and scrutinized dimensions of Suleymanoglu's career. Since most of this section is gleaned from interviews, articles, and newspapers, this is primarily a chronological and anecdotal account of Suleymanoglu's defection, (2) post-defection conflict between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments, and (3) Suleymanoglu's influence on the 1989 exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey.

The first segment contains analysis and detail regarding Suleymanoglu's defection to Turkey. Due to the pressures and discriminating policies promulgated by Bulgaria's communist regime, Suleymanoglu defected to Turkey in 1986 while he was competing at the World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, Australia. The defection plan was executed by the Turkish Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, who later would become the President of Turkey. Notably, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (in Turkish: *Milli Istihbarat Teskilati*, MIT) became involved in this defection plan to ensure Suleymanoglu safely travelled from Melbourne, Australia to London, England, and hence to Istanbul, Turkey.

The second segment covers the post-defection confrontation between the Turkish government and the Bulgarian government as Suleymanoglu was intent on competing for his adopted Turkey at the Olympic Games. The solution of the problem between the two countries resulted in the payment of \$1.2 million U.S. dollars to the Bulgarian

government in order for Turkey to obtain Suleymanoglu's competition "telecast" from the Bulgarian authority.

The final segment serves to connect Suleymanoglu's influence on ethnic-Turks embroiled in the 1989 emigration process. After the successful completion of the defection plan, Suleymanoglu's first move after arriving in Istanbul was to discard his Bulgarian birth name and assume his Turkish-heritage family's Muslim name of "Naim Suleymanoglu." Secondly, with Turgut Ozal, Suleymanoglu started speaking out through various media channels. He discussed how the communist Bulgarian government assimilated ethnic-Turks into Bulgarian society. Through these speeches, Suleymanoglu became a voice for the ethnic-Turks. Additionally, this Chapter also examines the Bulgarization Project's repercussions for the Bulgarian government and its people. After the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria, in the latter part of 1989, the healing process began between ethnic-Turks and the newly formed Bulgarian government and between the Bulgarian and Turkish governments.

Chapter 4: Naim Suleymanoglu in the Olympics

Suleymanoglu competed in four Olympic Games: the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. As the Soviet Bloc, which included Bulgaria, boycotted the 1984 Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu was unable to participate in Los Angeles. In its stead

Suleymanoglu attended the “1984 Moscow Friendship Games,” where he won the gold medal in his weight division.³²

Each Olympic Games for Suleymanoglu has a unique story. Merely serving as a narrative endpoint, the segments are as follows: (1) 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games, (2) 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, and (3) 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. It is worth noting here that Suleymanoglu's performance at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games is part of the following Chapter as his glorious weightlifting career concludes with a disappointing performance in Sydney.

Chapter 5: A Less Than Glorious Ending

This Chapter is divided into four segments. The first segment serves to cover the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, and the second segment contains the post-retirement part of Suleymanoglu's life. After Suleymanoglu retired from his competitive weightlifting career, he continued to inspire youths in Turkey to become Olympic athletes. Working for the Turkish Weightlifting Federation and International Weightlifting Federation assisted with globally improving the weightlifting discipline, particularly in Turkey. The third segment follows Suleymanoglu's career in politics. As well, it also examines Suleymanoglu's health-related issues leading to his subsequent death. Throughout Suleymanoglu's life, he suffered from liver disease. In 2009, he was hospitalized after experiencing a convulsion attack. In 2017, he underwent a liver transplant; however, he

³² Suleymanoglu's performance can also be compared to that of Shu-De Wu's of China. At the 1984 Moscow Friendship Games, Suleymanoglu's measured competition weights were as follows: 132.5 kg. in the snatch, and the clean & jerk of 165 kg., which totalled 297.5 kg. When comparing Wu's, who was also the gold medal winner in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games in the bantamweight category (52-56 kg.), their noted weights are also as follows: 120 kg. in the snatch, the clean & jerk 147.5 kg., totaling 267.5 kg.

passed away suddenly on November 18, 2017, and was buried at the Edirnekapi Martyr's Cemetery in Istanbul.

The fourth segment contains the conclusion of the thesis. This study examines the events of Suleymanoglu's life and his achievements that influenced and inspired ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria and Turkey through his involvement in the Olympic Games. This study found a bilateral relationship between Suleymanoglu's accomplishments at the Olympic Games and the 1989 emigration process of ethnic -Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey as a result of Suleymanoglu's influence on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria.

Suleymanoglu's international sporting successes made him a role model in Bulgaria, where he encouraged and influenced ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to fight for their rights to immigrate to Turkey. With Suleynamoglu's efforts, ethnic-Turks continued to reclaim their fundamental rights. After he defected to Turkey in 1986, Suleymanoglu's encouragement continued to influence ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria throughout his career in the Olympic Games. Consequently, Turkish Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, opened the Turkish border to ethnic-Turks. As a result, thousands of Turks immigrated to Turkey in 1989.

After Suleymanoglu retired from an active weightlifting career, he worked for the World Weightlifting Federation and the Turkish Weightlifting Federation to promote weightlifting world-wide, but more particularly in Turkey.

Chapter Two

Naim Suleymanoglu and the Bulgarization Project

2.1 Historical Background of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria (1946-1990)

The present religion and ethnic mosaic in the Balkans are the product of millennia of migratory invasions.¹ The Balkans occupy an important geographical position. Since ancient times, Balkan nations have acted as a gateway between Asia, Europe, and Africa, through the presence of a well-developed road system for carrying military, commercial, cultural, and administration traffic.² The empires of the Middle Ages and later Turkish-based groups always aspired to control the Balkans. Groups such as the Huns, Bulgars, Avars, Oguz, Uz, Cumans, Tatars, Turcomans, Turks, and Pechenegs have passed through and settled in Bulgaria as well as in other Balkan nations.³ Each group experienced both minor and major impacts on the religious, cultural, and political landscape of the Balkans in general and particularly in Bulgaria.

Subsequently, the Ottoman Empire conquered the Balkan regions, and a significant Turkish presence was established in Bulgaria between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which resulted in a change of demographic structure of the Balkans in favour of the Turks. This continued until the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. When the Ottoman Empire's power and control in the Balkans began to diminish, one after the other, newly independent Balkan states rose to take their place in the world's community

¹ Ali Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," *Nationalities Papers*, 28, no. 1 (2000): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990050002489>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

of nations. According to the European Media, the Ottoman Empire's collapse was pointed out as the “Sick man of Europe.”

In this volatile environment, Bulgaria separated from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.⁴ It must be said that this was somewhat favourable for many minority groups. There was minor interference in the offices of educational, religious, and cultural institutions in Bulgaria before the communist regime came to power. However, this situation altered as conditions became unfavourable after the communist regime rose to power in Bulgaria (1946-1990). The communist regime closed many educational centers and mosques as well as forbade the speaking of the native language to limit the Islamic influence on ethnic-Turks.

During World War II, Bulgaria was an ally of Nazi Germany. After World War II, the Soviet military-sponsored the establishment of a communist regime in Bulgaria, largely by means of a military coup. This took place in 1944. Throughout communist-ruled Bulgaria, the conditions worsened dramatically as the systematic assimilation of the Turkish minority was one of the primary issues of the Bulgarian Communist Party's (BCP) agenda.⁵ The primary reason why the BCP targeted ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria was a subsequent response to the Ottoman Empire's immigration to and the foreign policy regulations in the Balkans.⁶ According to Koksal and Gul, "the BCP's ultimate goal was

⁴ In 1878, Bulgaria gained autonomy from the Ottoman Empire through the Treaty of Berlin. In 1908, Bulgaria declared its full independence from the Ottoman Empire.

⁵ Tamer Koksal and Zakir Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms: Post Assimilation Campaign Against the Turkish Minority in Bulgaria/Bulgaristan'daki Türk Azinligina Yönelik Asimilasyon Kampanyasi Sonrasi Özelinde Geçis Dönemi Adaleti Mekanizmalarinin Uygulamasi," *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, 9, no. 34 (2013): 121.

⁶ The Ottoman officials encouraged the Turks that were inhabiting the state of Anatolia to settle in the Balkans, as the Ottoman Empire would then be able to easily control the Balkans.

to integrate all minorities into Bulgarian society, and to create one-nation."⁷ In order for the BCP to reach its goals, ethnic-Turks were forbidden from studying in the Turkish language at Turkish schools, publishing newspapers in Turkish, facilitating radio broadcasts in their native language, and practicing the religion of Islam in Bulgaria. More specifically, the BCP officials denied the existence of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. For example, at one of the BCP's meetings in the early stage of the communist regime in Bulgaria, BCP leader Georgi Dimitrov declared the communist party's intentions. He exclaimed:

It is necessary to say this, this declaration should remain between us. We have a big problem. It is not something from yesterday. There are non-Bulgarian people on our southern border. This is our constantly bleeding wound. As the Communist Party and the Bulgarian State, we must find a reason, destroy them from there and banish them elsewhere. We should place the people of Bulgarian origin in their place.⁸

He further stated:

There are Turkish communities living in Shumen, Razgrad and other parts of Bulgaria. Due to the given freedom Mufti [religious leader], Turkish agents are comfortably active. Turkish nationalism has started to spread among young people. Turks turned their eyes to Istanbul and Ankara. For this reason, the necessary steps should be taken, and this issue should end in 1948. We need people who are willing to work on this matter in the National Committee of the Homeland, as expecting the operation on Turks will be difficult.⁹

These declarations show the extent to which the communist regime in Bulgaria began to target ethnic-Turks. In conjunction with these sentiments, in 1989, communist leader Todor Zhivkov made his famous statement to exclaim that "there are no Turks in

⁷ Koksall and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 121.

⁸ Ibrahim Kamil, "Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Gerçekleşen 1950-1951 Göçünün Nedenleri/the Reasons of 1950-1951 Migrations towards Turkey from Bulgaria," *Balkan Araştırma Enstitüsü Dergisi-Trakya Üniversitesi*, 5, no. 2 (2016): 44.

⁹ Ibid.

Bulgaria."¹⁰ However, Bulgaria facilitated various agreements to protect the rights of ethnic-Turks since Bulgaria's independence.¹¹

As previously presented, Dimitrov aimed to construct ethnic-Turks as a threat towards Bulgaria. Furthermore, Zhivkov also denied the existence of Turks in Bulgaria. Although ethnic-Turks possessed Bulgarian passports, they had to endure the many assimilative processes in Bulgaria, particularly during the communist regime. The primary method of assimilation was also known as the "Bulgarization Project."

2.2 The Bulgarization Project and Its Imposition on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria

Towards the late 1980s and early 1990s, the communist Bulgarian government implemented the Bulgarization Project, which was also known as "the Revival Project." As previously mentioned, the purpose of this endeavour was to assimilate minority groups, including Muslims, whose ancestors established the Islamic religion in the Balkans during the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. The assimilation of ethnic-Turks was based on the metaphor of "rebirth," which originates from one of the most critical national Bulgarian narratives. According to this narrative, the Christians were forcibly made to convert to Islam during the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.¹² It was this involuntary and enforced conversion to Islam that later determined how the ancestors

¹⁰ Mary Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish encounters and the re-imaging of the Bulgarian nation (1878-1995)," *East European Quarterly*, 31, no. 1 (1997): 6.

¹¹ The following is a list of the minority rights agreements: 1878 - the Treaty of Berlin, 1909 - the Istanbul Protocol and Agreement, 1913 - the Turkey-Bulgaria Peace Treaty, 1919 - the Treaty of Neuilly, 1925 - the Turkey-Bulgaria Non-Aggression Treaty, 1925 – the Turkey-Bulgaria Convention of Establishment, 1947- The Bulgarian Peace Treaty, 1968 - The Turkey-Bulgaria Migration Agreement, and other international human rights agreements. Source: Turhan Çetin, "BULGARİSTAN'DAN TÜRKİYE'YE SON TÜRK GÖÇÜNÜN (1989) SOSYO-EKONOMİK ETKİLERİ/THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF THE LAST TURKISH MIGRATION (1989) FROM BULGARIA TO TURKEY," *Turkish Studies International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 3, no. 7 (2008): 242, 243.

¹² Ali Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria: post-1989 developments," *Nationalities Papers*, 27, no. 1 (1999): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/009059999109172>.

of the Ottomans would then be perceived by those residing in the Balkans after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the Bulgarian government sought to subsume its multiple minority groups, particularly ethnic-Turks.

The Bulgarization Project included the enforcement of name changes to Bulgar names, forbade the speaking of native and dialectic languages other than those of Bulgar origin, banned various religious practices, and prohibited the wearing of traditional clothes, all in keeping with the Soviet line of consuming communism.

2.2.1 Religion

Based on the constitution of Bulgaria, the citizens of Bulgaria were guaranteed freedom of conscience and creed, permitting them from performing and practicing their religious rites.¹³ However, in practice, the constitution of Bulgaria ignored the fundamental rights of ethnic-Turks and continued to attack them. Islamic schools were closed, and the teaching of religion was banned, even under private circumstances. Mosques were either torn down, used as museums, or community centers. Not only were mosques razed, but also many of the Ottoman architectural heritage sites were as well; many of these sites disappeared in Bulgaria between 1984 and 1989. For instance, in the town of Shumen, more than 40 mosques were recorded in the mid-19th century; however, only eight remained in 1980 and three in 1989.¹⁴ As seen, religion was targeted by the communist rulers of Bulgaria in order to exterminate ethnic-Turks' beliefs.

Between 1984 and 1989, the communist regime increased the amount of pressure that their government placed on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. Traditional Islamic funeral celebrations were prohibited during the so-called "Bulgarization Project," and ethnic-

¹³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴ Ibid., 41.

Turks were not able to bury their dead in cemeteries.¹⁵ Many Muslim gravestones with Turkish inscriptions were destroyed. Furthermore, Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, were banned, the wearing of traditional religious clothing was outlawed, and the circumcision of Muslim children was also prohibited. Eminov noted:

Muslim parents were required to sign documents promising not to circumcise their male children. Health officials regularly visited Muslim households and schools to inspect young Muslim boys and to make sure that the ban against circumcision was observed. If the health officials discovered that the ban had been violated, both the parent and the person who performed the circumcision were punished.¹⁶

In sum, religion was the direct target of communist leaders through the execution of assimilation campaigns. The main reason why the communist rulers targeted ethnic-Turks, in particular, was due to the fact that these Turks were the ancestors of the Ottomans who had forced Bulgarians to convert to Islam under the previous rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Therefore, communist rulers expected ethnic-Turks to return to the original Eastern Orthodox religion of Bulgaria.

2.2.2 Language

From Bulgaria's independence to WW II, ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria maintained the use of their native language by attending private Turkish language schools controlled by the ethnic-Turkish community. In 1947, the Bulgarian constitution allowed the minority groups in Bulgaria to learn and study in their native languages under article 47, which stated that "national minorities have a right to education in their vernacular and to develop their national cultures, while the study of Bulgarian is compulsory."¹⁸ However, not only were community-controlled ethnic-Turkish schools starting to become

¹⁵ Ali Eminov, "Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria: A brief history," *Islamic studies*, 36, no. 2/3 (1997): 228.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 229.

¹⁸ Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," 139.

nationalized, but they were also becoming a part of the public school system in Bulgaria. This nationalization attempt in Turkish-language schools completely changed the education of youths within the ethnic-Turkish community. Although Turkish was the language of instruction and remained in ethnic-Turkish schools, the curriculum changed nation-wide, whereby specific ideological orientation was imposed through the compulsory study of Bulgarian.¹⁹

By 1984 the government prohibited all expressions of Turkish identities, such as listening to Turkish music, speaking Turkish in public, having Turkish books in one's home, singing Turkish songs, all of which were grounds for fines, internal exile, and imprisonment.²⁰ Additionally, native Turkish authors were forced to use Slavic terminology in all of their writings. Those who resisted and used the forbidden words were censored or reprimanded.

From the beginning, the Communist Party leaders saw education as a way to impose its communist and nationalistic ideologies on Bulgarian youth. In time, then, the communist government nationalized the Turkish language-based schools in Bulgaria. In 1984, the Turkish language was prohibited at all levels in Bulgaria. This situation continued until the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria in late 1989.

2.2.3 The “Name Change” Issue

From 1984 to late 1985, the Bulgarian government launched an extensive name-changing campaign against ethnic-Turks to create a single-state nation, in many cases buttressed by excessive force. This campaign continued until late 1989. As part of this campaign, the Bulgarian government forced ethnic-Turks to change their names to

¹⁹ Ibid., 139, 140.

²⁰ Ibid., 144.

Bulgarian (Slavic) names. This was meant to strip them of their ethnic identity. Kucukcan notes that the community of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria displayed a strong sense of resistance to this measure of assimilation, as they quite naturally wanted to protect and maintain their ethnic and Islamic identities within their society.²¹ However, tensions escalated as the Bulgarian government began to imprison and arrest dissident ethnic-Turks in an attempt to quell the resistance. However, Atasoy and Soykan note that:

...organized resistance of the Turks against the regime was hindered because resistance to events met with harsh winter conditions, telephone lines and transportation were blocked deliberately, weapons of Muslim-Turk hunters were collected, and the news of hundreds of Turks being killed in many villages circulated.²²

In sum, in the process of the government's enforcement of these actions, many ethnic-Turks were either killed or "deported" from their community.

From early 1984 to late 1985, the name-changing campaign accelerated under the title of "the reconstruction of Bulgarian name," where Bulgarian government authorities installed a campaign to deny the existence of an ethnic-Turks population.²³ For those who ultimately changed their names, they signed petitions stating that they had changed their names voluntarily. This action indicates that the Bulgarian government took precautionary measures to ensure that the government's reputation was protected, especially if it came to any future international inquiries that could shed light on the truth of the government's substantial ethnic censure and abolishment agenda. Atasoy and Soykan also state that:

²¹ Talip Küçükcan, "Re-claiming identity: ethnicity, religion and politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19, no. 1 (1999): 56.

²² Emin Atasoy and Abdullah Soykan, "Freedom walk of the Turks in Bulgaria: Events of May in 1989 and their reflections," *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 19 (2011): 114.

²³ Küçükcan, "Re-claiming identity," 57.

For those who opposed returning to the origin process or did not support state policies, the first step was firing them from work, the second step is to interrogate them in police stations and persuading them for cooperation, and the third step is expelling or jailing them.²⁴

In 1985, the Interior Minister of Bulgaria announced that 822,588 people's names had changed, but Bulgarian military documents indicated that this number was 1,306,000 (including Pomaks and ethnic-Turks).²⁵ According to Nevrezova, in 1985, 310,000 ethnic-Turks' names had been changed, more specifically 214,000 from the Kurdzhali region; 41,000 from the Haskoy region; 22,000 from Filibe region; 5,000 from the Pazardjik region; 11,000 from Eski Zagra region; and 9,000 from the Burgaz region.²⁶ The name-changing process was the last attempt of the Bulgarian government to fulfil its assimilation agenda before the collapse of the communist era.

In late 1989, near the end of the communist regime's rule in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian government increased the momentum of its assimilation tactics, which led to further protests accompanied by a mass exodus of ethnic-Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey.

2.2.4 The General Results of the Bulgarization Project

Significant waves of emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey occurred subsequent to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Although the speed of the immigration and emigration processes marginally decreased after the Balkan Wars (1912-1913),²⁷ the

²⁴ Atasoy and Soykan, "Freedom walk of the Turks in Bulgaria," 114.

²⁵ Hüseyin Kazan and Sevinç Aslan, "ETNİK TERÖRİZM VE BULGARİSTAN'DA ETNİK GRUPLARA UYGULANAN ASİMİLASYON POLİTİKALARI/ETHNIC TERRORISM AND ASSIMILATION POLITICS AGAINST MINORITY GROUPS IN BULGARIA," *TURAN: Stratejik Arastirmalar Merkezi*, 9, no. 36 (2017): 661. Note: The Pomaks minority group is referred to Bulgarian speaking Muslims.

²⁶ Aydzhan Nevrezova, "Bulgar Yönetiminde Azınlıklar (1878-2004)/Minorities under Bulgarian Rules (1878-2004)" (master's thesis, Gazi University/Turkey, 2006), 37.

²⁷ The Balkan Wars occurred between the Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire between 1912 and 1913. After the wars ended, the emigration rate of ethnic-Turks from the Balkan states to Turkey increased considerably for a decade.

bilateral immigration agreement between Turkey and Bulgaria in 1948-1951 allowed 155,581 ethnic-Turks to immigrate to Turkey (See **Table 1**). Eminov notes that between 1950-1951, 154,393 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey.²⁸ Although the noted statistics indicate a minor change in the number of emigrants, an average number as to how many people emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey between 1948-1951 is also presented. The 1948-1951 waves of emigration were under the control of both countries. Although many ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey up until 1951, a considerable number of their community remained in Bulgaria, particularly within Southern Bulgaria.

Years	Number of Emigrants
1878-1912	350,000
1923-1933	101,000
1934-1939	70,632
1948-1951	155,581
1968-1984	113,836
Total	719,836

Source: Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish emigration and return," *International migration review*, 26, no. 2 (1992): 346.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the communist Bulgarian government implemented the Bulgarization Project, which was used against the ethnic-Turkish population in order to create one nation-state in Bulgaria. From the winter of 1984 to late 1989, the assimilation processes intensified as ethnic-Turks were prohibited from speaking their native language, practicing the Islamic religion, wearing their traditional clothes, and from forming their own rights to education, which included being barred from learning the Turkish language and had to accept the changing of ethnic-Turkish names to Slavic names. For those who refused to obey the Bulgarization Project and its corresponding assimilation policies, they were either killed or imprisoned. In order to

²⁸ Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria," 31.

suppress the resistance of ethnic-Turks, the communist Bulgarian authorities created a concentration camp near Kurdzhali, called “Belene Concentration Camp,” which persecuted and killed ethnic-Turks who fought for their rights. At this camp, 2,500 ethnic-Turks were murdered during the Bulgarization Project.²⁹

In early 1985, President Kenan Evren of Turkey sent a letter to Zhivkov, requesting the Bulgarian government to put a stop to the Bulgarization Project. However, Zhivkov refused to accept Kenan's request and declared that although Bulgaria wished to maintain a respectable relationship with Turkey, the Bulgarization Project is an internal matter.³⁰ Kenan's attempt did not stop Zhivkov, as Zhivkov continued disseminating the assimilation campaign against ethnic-Turks.

As a result of the implementation of the Bulgarization Project, a mass exodus occurred in late 1989 from Bulgaria to Turkey. In other words, 313,894 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey (**See Table 2**). According to Eminov, 350,000 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria in 1989 between June and August.³¹ On average, over 300,000 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria in 1989. This wave of immigration was the vastest population movement in the Balkans since WW II.³² The detailed results of the Bulgarization Project and the 1989 emigration process can be found in Chapter four.

²⁹ Çetin, "BULGARİSTAN'DAN TÜRKİYE'YE SON TÜRK GÖÇÜNÜN (1989) SOSYO-EKONOMİK ETKİLERİ/THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF THE LAST TURKISH MIGRATION (1989) FROM BULGARIA TO TURKEY," 244.

³⁰ Ömer Engin Lütem, *Türk-Bulgar ilişkileri, 1983-1989/The Relationship between Turkey and Bulgaria, 1983-1989* (Ankara/Turkey: Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi, 2000), 176.

³¹ Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria," 32.

³² Koksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 122.

Years	Number of Emigrants
1878-1892	279,397
1893-1902	70,603
1912-1920	413,922
1921-1922	21,172
1923-1939	198,688
1940-1949	21,353
1950-1951	154,393
1952-1968	24
1969-1978	113,393
1979-1988	20
1989	313,894
1990-1997	209,500
Total	1,796,359

Source: Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Türk basınında Bulgaristan Türkleri: zorla ad değiştirme sorunu: Ocak-Nisan 1985/Bulgarian-Turks in the Turkish press: the issue of forced name changes: January-April 1985* (Ankara: Başbakanlık, Basın, Yayın, ve Enformasyon Genel Müdürlüğü, 1985), 51, quoted in Çetin, "BULGARİSTAN'DAN TÜRKİYE'YE SON TÜRK GÖÇÜNÜN (1989) SOSYO-EKONOMİK ETKİLERİ/THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF THE LAST TURKISH MIGRATION (1989) FROM BULGARIA TO TURKEY," 246.

2.3 Living Under the Bulgarization Project: Understanding the Life of Naim Suleymanoglu and the Reasons Behind His Defection

As the communist Bulgarian government executed their assimilation campaign against ethnic-Turks between from the 1970s to late 1980s in Bulgaria, in such a volatile environment, on January 23, 1967, Naim Suleymanoglu³³ was born as Naim Suleymanov in Ahatli, also known as Ptichar (a small village in Kurdzhali/Kircaali region) (**See Image**

³³ In chronological order, Naim Suleymanoglu's name changed three times within his lifetime. He was born as Naim Suleymanov in 1967. Afterwards, the communist Bulgarian authorities changed his name to Naum Shalamanov in 1985. Once he defected to Turkey in 1986, Suleymanov's first move was to discard his Bulgarian birth name and assume his Turkish-heritage family's Muslim name — Naim Suleymanoglu.

1). This village is located in the Rhodope Mountains and is mostly known as an ethnic-Turkish town. After Suleymanov turned two-years-old, he and his family moved to Mastanli (slightly bigger than Ahatli), in Kurdzhali in 1969.³⁴ Kurdzhali is located in Southern Bulgaria and was mostly populated by ethnic-Turks during the 19th and 20th centuries (**See Map 1**). As seen on the featured map on the following page,

in the district of Kurdzhali in southeastern Bulgaria, Muslim-Turks were the majority, with 65.7% of the district population. In the district of Razgrad in northeastern Bulgaria, they made up 47.4% of the district population. Other districts with significant Turkish Muslim-populations included Silistra (33.5%), Turgovishte (32.8%), Shumen (30.3%), Dobrich (14.7%), Burgas (13.8%), Ruse (13.0%), Haskovo (11.4%), and Blagoevgrad 22 (11.3%). The 1992 census also showed that Turkish speakers were predominantly rural, with more than two-thirds (68.5%) living in villages.³⁵

The main reason why Suleymanov's family moved to Mastanli was to find better living conditions as Ahatli was not suitable for agriculture.³⁶

Suleymanov registered at Mastanli Elementary School in 1974, where he completed his first three years of education. In 1977, a weightlifting coach in Kurdzhali, Enver Turkileri, established a weightlifting team for ethnic-Turk youths who were capable and interested in weightlifting.³⁷ Turkileri's purpose of establishing a weightlifting team in Mastanli and Kurdzhali was to generate a source of pride for youth ethnic-Turks and to increase the presence of ethnic-Turks in weightlifting within the Rhodope region.³⁸

³⁴ Tamer Taspinar, *Naim Cep Hekulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules* (Ankara: Ted Matbaacilik, 2019), 5, <https://halter.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/halterkitapcik.pdf>.

³⁵ Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," 139.

³⁶ Upon moving to Mastanli, Suleymanov's father, Suleyman Suleymanoglu (Suleyman Huseyinov), began working as a driver in the Mastanli-Kurdzhali bus route while his mom, Hatice Suleymanoglu, who worked in agriculture.

³⁷ Enver Turkileri was Naim Suleymanoglu's weightlifting coach in both Bulgaria and Turkey.

³⁸ Enver Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu-The Pocket Hercules*, translated by Erdogan Guleri, edited by Lou Demarco and Andrew Charniga (Michigan: Sportivny Press, 2004), 8.



Map 1: The Map represents the population of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria in 1992.

Source: The map was prepared by Prof. Randy Bertolas of Wayne State College in Detroit, Michigan, USA, quoted in Eminov, "Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," 233.



Image 1: Pictured is the town of Ptichar (Ahatli), where Naim Suleymanov was born. In the lower right-hand corner, Suleymanov is depicted with his medals from the 1982 World Junior Championships in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Source: Andreas Möller, "Türkiye Ve Dünya Tarihinin En Büyük Sporcularından Nam-ı Diğer Cep Herkülü: Naim Süleymanoğlu/One of the Best Athletes in History for both Turkey and the World, Recalling the Pocket Hercules: Naim Suleymanoglu," *Onedio*, last updated November 26, 2019. <https://onedio.com/haber/turkiye-ve-dunya-tarihinin-en-buyuk-sporcularindan-nam-i-diger-cepherkulu-naim-suleymanoglu-890231>.

An upper-year student from Naim Suleymanov's school, Halim Munirov, suggested to Hilmi Pekunlu (Hilmi Muminov)³⁹ that he keep his eye on a young boy living in the Kurdzhali region, whose nickname was “Kalemando.”⁴⁰ This little boy was Naim Suleymanov (**Image 2**). According to Turkileri, Suleymanov had not initially been interested in weightlifting because he was short; he would have preferably chosen to play table tennis or do wrestling.⁴¹ However, being short and muscular in body composition, Suleymanov's early coach, Hilmi Pekunlu, directed him towards becoming a weightlifter.

Taspinar notes that:

Suleymanov loved sports. There was the stadium right across from his house, where he was always gone swimming in the pool. Then, too, Suleymanov did gymnastics and wrestling. When he was nine years old, a weightlifting coach, Hilmi Pekunlu, discovered him; so, he started weightlifting. At that time, weightlifting was a popular sport in Bulgaria. World and Olympic champions were athletes from Bulgaria. For this reason, Suleymanov wanted to be just like them. Therefore, he continued his training with coach Hilmi for one and a half years in Mastanli.⁴²

³⁹ Hilmi Pekunlu started working as a weightlifting coach in 1975 in Mastanli. He was visiting schools to find potential youth weightlifters in Mastanli. At that time, Suleymanoglu was in grade 3. After Pekunlu selected Suleymanoglu, they started training twice a day, with 2-hour long sessions in the mornings and afternoons. Source: Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 8.

⁴⁰ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 9. Note: Kalemando is a cartoon character in Bulgaria during Suleymanoglu's childhood, and it was Suleymanov's first nickname. It was given to him by his friends in reference to the Kalemando cartoon character being small and brave.

⁴¹ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 9.

⁴² Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 5.



Image 2: Suleymanov, the youngest person in the photo, can be seen sitting at the very front of his group with the rest of his older weightlifting teammates in Kurdzhali.

Source: TRTSPOR, “Kapikule’nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule,” YouTube video/Screenshot, 2:53, last updated June 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRtURXQ603o>.

Then, too, Pekunlu took Suleymanov to the hospital to ensure he had no health concerns and could continue to lift weights. Although Suleymanov was relatively young, he demonstrated an aptitude for weightlifting after being taught. After five months, Suleymanov won a local weightlifting competition in Mastanli.⁴³ In 1976, Suleymanov participated as a demonstrator at the Bulgarian Stars National Championships (the youngest category) held in Kurdzhali, and he lifted 25 kg. in the clean & jerk.⁴⁴ This demonstration was particularly crucial as Suleymanov showcased his talents to other national coaches in Bulgaria. Moreover, to encourage Suleymanov, he was invited to carry the Bulgarian national flag in the opening ceremonies at a tournament between the Kurdzhali weightlifting team and the North-Sestina weightlifting team from Soviet

⁴³ In order to encourage youths, Hilmi Pekunlu and Enver Turkileri usually organized local weightlifting competitions in Mastanli. Source: TRTSPOR, “Kapikule’nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule,” YouTube video, 3:47.

⁴⁴ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 8, 9.

Russia in June of 1977.⁴⁵ After the competition, Turkileri and Pekunlu persuaded Suleymanov and his family in order to continue Suleymanov's training program under Turkileri's supervision.⁴⁶ Then, too, Suleymanov registered at the Sports Academy Institution in Kurdzhali (**Image 3**).



Image 3: Suleymanov and his classmates together at the Kurdzhali Sports Academy.
Source: TRTSPOR, "Kapikule' nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video/Screenshot, 5:28.

The Kurdzhali Sports Academy was an opportunity for Suleymanov to improve his academic and weightlifting skills.⁴⁷ In 1977, Suleymanov commenced his organized training sessions as soon as he enrolled in the Kurdzhali Sports Academy. Notably, organized training sessions in sports academy institutions were an essential part of the sport policies legislated by the allied communist states.

⁴⁵ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 9.

⁴⁶ Enver Turkileri promised Suleymanov's family that he would be looked after. Until then, Suleymanov was trained by Hilmi Pekunlu; however, Pekunlu had to complete his mandatory two-year military service in Bulgaria. When Pekunlu came back from his military service, he went to Russia to work for eight years. There was no one in the school to take care of Suleymanov. As such Turkileri's promises convinced Suleymanov's family. Additionally, the Kurdzhali Sports Academy was only 15 km away from Mastanli, so Suleymanov would be able to spend his weekends with his family. Source: Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 10.

⁴⁷ Gary Smith, "Naim Suleymanoglu Flees Bulgarian Oppression & Lifts Turkey," *Sports Illustrated Vault*, July 22, 1992, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1992/07/22/the-weight-of-the-world-having-fled-oppression-in-bulgaria-naim-suleymanoglu-now-strains-under-the-adoration-of-the-entire-turkish-people>.

After 1970, the Eastern Bloc countries, including Bulgaria, conducted scientific methods to increase athletes' performances at the Olympic Games and at other international competitions; they desired to use the Olympic Games as a means to demonstrate to their domestic constituency how significant their standing was to the rest of the world.⁴⁸ In other words, Soviet allied countries purposely aimed to dominate weightlifting, wrestling and boxing as these sports are muscularity-based, which they believed manifested the idea of Soviet supremacy.⁴⁹ To reach higher levels of performance and to increase the number of athletes in the country, a number of sport-based schools and research centers increased in Bulgaria during the Cold War timeline (1947-1991). This was essential for Suleymanov because he was too young to begin weightlifting training. To start this training in Bulgaria, athletes need to be between the ages of 13 and 15; in Russia, the ages of 14 and 15; and in Germany, the ages of 15 and 16.⁵⁰ In this case, Suleymanov was unable to start his training program until he was 13-years-old.

This limitation restricted many youths from commencing their training programs. Therefore, intending to lower the age requirement, the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF) decided to increase the amount of funding that was invested in scientific research studies to prove that there were not any health concerns that could arise for weightlifters that began their careers at an earlier age. Then, the requirement was finally decreased to a minimum age of 10-years-old in order to start the training program in weightlifting, with

⁴⁸ Lincoln Allison, "The Olympic movement and the end of the Cold War," *World Affairs*, 157, no. 2 (1994): 93.

⁴⁹ Vassil Girginov, "Capitalist philosophy and communist practice: The transformation of Eastern European sport and the International Olympic Committee," *Culture, Sport Society*, 1, no. 1 (1998): 124.

⁵⁰ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 11.

the families' permission, in Bulgaria.⁵¹ With the new age regulation, Suleymanov was able to start lifting weights at the end of 1977.⁵² Subsequently, he showed quite a significant physical improvement (See Table 3). The success of the athletes in the Eastern Bloc countries was based on an intense, centralized system for early identification of talent, development and reward, which was supported and controlled by the state.⁵³

Table 3		
Physical Test Results of Naim Suleymanov (September 15, 1978).		Physical Test Results of Naim Suleymanov (September 15, 1979).
Height	124 cm.	131 cm.
Weight	31 kg.	41 kg.
Standing Vertical Jump	56 cm.	65 cm.
Standing Long Jump	163 cm.	180 cm.
30 Metre Sprint	6.1 second	5.8 second
Chin Ups	18	22

Source: Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 129, 131.

When Suleymanov turned fourteen-years-old, he was already a junior and youth-level weightlifting champion in Bulgaria. In 1982, Suleymanov was selected to the Bulgarian national weightlifting team. Turkileri stated that the fact that 14-15-year-old teenager, Naim Suleymanov, became a part of the Bulgarian national team, whose other members were between 25 to 30-years-old, was extraordinary.⁵⁴ That same year, Suleymanov competed at the World Junior Championships in Sao Paulo, Brazil.⁵⁵ The following year, at the 1983 World Championships in Moscow, Soviet Union,

⁵¹ Ibid., 12.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Girginov, "Capitalist philosophy and communist practice," 127.

⁵⁴ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 7:10.

⁵⁵ Naim Suleymanov lifted 110 kg. in the snatch, plus 140 kg. in the clean & jerk, totalling 240 kg. in the 52 kg. weight-class. Source: Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 12.

Suleymanov won the silver medal.⁵⁶ This success made him the youngest ever world record holder in weightlifting at the age of fifteen.⁵⁷ According to Turkileri, this was an unheard-of accomplishment in weightlifting.⁵⁸ The followers of elite weightlifting competitions became aware of Suleymanov as he showcased his name before a world-wide weightlifting community with this achievement in Brazil, which resulted in not only the proud support of the ethnic-Turks but also in Suleymanov becoming a role model in his respective ethnic-community (**Image 4**). Notably, a cascade of gifts was given to Suleymanov: a salary, an apartment in Kurdzhali, and a car from the BWF.⁵⁹ In the communist system, these gifts and special considerations were not available to anyone. It is worth noting here that, in 1983, Suleymanov was invited to a tournament in the USA, where the U.S. media called him “Pocket Hercules.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Hekulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 5.

⁵⁷ Bill Mallon, “Obituaries,” *Journal of Olympic History*, 26, no 1, 2018, 72.

Note: Suleymanov set a new world record by lifting 130 kg. in the snatch, in Moscow.

⁵⁸ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 12.

⁵⁹ Although Suleymanov was not qualified to drive a car due to being underage, the Bulgarian authorities made special consideration for him to use the car. Source: Tufan Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu:Ozgurluge Ucan Dev/Naim Suleymanoglu:The Giant Flying to Freedom* (Istanbul/Turkey: MD Basim, 2020), 28.

⁶⁰ TRTSPOR, “Kapikule’nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule,” YouTube video, 11:07.



Image 4: Depicted here is a ceremony for Suleymanov when he won a gold medal at the 1982 World Junior Championships in Sao Paola, Brazil in Kurdzhali. The lady circled in red is Suleymanov's mother, Hatice Suleymanoglu, who was also present at Naim Suleymanov's celebration. Source: TRTSPOR, "Kapikule' nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video/Screenshot, 14:49.

Although Bulgaria was part of the Eastern Bloc, there was a competitive rivalry between Bulgaria and the other Eastern Bloc allies. When it comes to weightlifting, Bulgaria always desired to defeat other Eastern Bloc supporters as a means to demonstrate the country's national strength.⁶¹ This was the case at the 1984 European Weightlifting Championships in Vitoria, Spain. Suleymanov competed against Frank Mavius of East Germany in the 56 kg. weight-class. Mavius lifted 120 kg. in the snatch, 147.5 kg. in the clean & jerk, 267.5 kg in total, winning the silver medal. In response, Suleymanov lifted 130 kg. in the snatch, 167.5 kg. in the clean & jerk, 297.5 kg. in total, winning the gold medal. This was also a new world record in the 56 kg. weight-class. This crushing success against other Eastern Bloc countries made the Bulgarian authorities proud, and for the first time, Suleymanov was on the Turkish media in Turkey.⁶²

⁶¹ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 16.

⁶² Ibid.

Upon returning home, Suleymanov began to prepare for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games in the U.S. At this point, there were only 60 days left until the Games, and Suleymanov commenced with his heavy training program, where he trained 10-12 hours a day with his 20-24 years old teammates even though Suleymanoglu was 17 years old at that time.⁶³ On July 10, 1984, the Bulgarian national weightlifting team and its staff members were invited to a meeting in the federation building in Sofia, Bulgaria.⁶⁴ The delegation of the BWF announced that the Eastern Bloc countries would boycott the 1984 L.A. Games in response to the Western Bloc's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, held in Soviet Russia. This news discouraged everybody in the room as all Bulgarian weightlifters spent most of their time training.

To assist with establishing the historical backstory of the boycotting, Soviet Russia's army invaded Afghanistan in 1979. In response to this militarized action, the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games were boycotted by the Western Bloc states.⁶⁵ As a result of the boycotts, "many of the athletes were embittered by the sacrifice of their dreams to political expediency."⁶⁶ For much of the same reason, Suleymanov was prevented from participating in the 1984 L.A. Games due to the Eastern Bloc boycott. Instead, Eastern Bloc countries, including Bulgaria, participated in the 1984 Friendship Games.

Weightlifting competitions in the 1984 Friendship Games occurred in Varna, Bulgaria, between September 12th and 16th. Suleymanov won the gold medal for weightlifting in the 56 kg. weight-class. Here, it is worth comparing Suleymanov's lifts at

⁶³ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Stephen R. Wenn and Robert K. Barney, *The Gold in the Rings: the People and Events That Transformed the Olympic Games* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 83.

⁶⁶ Allen Guttmann, "The Cold War and the Olympics," *International Journal*, 43, no. 4 (1988): 561.

the 1984 Friendship Games to the lifts of gold medalist Shu-De WU of China, who also competed in the same bantamweight category (52-56 kg.), but at the 1984 L.A. Games. In assessing and comparing their results, Suleymanov was quite ahead of his competitors as he lifted 132.5 kg. in the snatch, 165 kg. in the clean & jerk, and 297.5 kg. in total. Shu-De WU lifted 120 kg. in the snatch, 147.5 kg. in the clean & jerk, and 267.5 kg. in total. The difference is 30 kg. between the two gold medal winners within two different sport events in the same year. If the Eastern Bloc did not boycott the 1984 L.A. Games, Suleymanov likely would have won the gold medal –at the tender age of 17 at the L.A. Games.⁶⁷ Todd pointed out Suleymanov's success by stating that Suleymanov is the best weightlifter globally without a doubt; however, being the best weightlifter in the world at the age of 16 or 17 is an extraordinary case.⁶⁸

After Suleymanov returned to Sofia from the 1984 Sarajevo World Cup Weightlifting in Yugoslavia, once he had established new world records,⁶⁹ the assimilation process against ethnic-Turks accelerated in Bulgaria. The Kurdzhali region was surrounded by Bulgarian soldiers and tanks for days to ensure that ethnic-Turks accepted the change to their non-Islamic Slavic names.⁷⁰ As soon as Suleymanov heard that Kurdzhali was encircled by Bulgarian military forces, he drove to his family's house to confirm that his family was safe. Though, on the road, Suleymanov was stopped by

⁶⁷ Craig Neff, "Little Big Man Pound for Pound, Turkey's Naim Suleymanoglu Is the Best," *Sports Illustrated Vault*, September 14, 1988, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1988/09/14/little-big-man-pound-for-pound-turkeys-naim-suleymanoglu-is-the-best>.

⁶⁸ Terry Todd, "Behold Bulgaria's Vest-Pocket Hercules," *Sports Illustrated Vault*, June 11, 1984, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1984/06/11/behold-bulgarias-vest-pocket-hercules>.

⁶⁹ Suleymanov's lifts are as follows: 142.5 kg. in the snatch (world record), 185.5 kg. in the clean & jerk (world record) and in total 328 kg. (world record) in the 56 kg. weight-class.

⁷⁰ Peter Alfano, "WeightLifting; A Great Weight Is Lifted from Turkey's Little Hero," *New York Times*, December 14, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/14/sports/weight-lifting-a-great-weight-is-lifted-from-turkey-s-little-hero.html>.

police guards and was also warned to change Suleymanov's way to Sofia. Then, one of the police guards remembered Suleymanov from the media channels and opened the Kurdzhali road to him.⁷¹ In particular, nothing happened to Suleymanov's family members, but the military guards and tanks attacked ethnic-Turks in Kurdzhali and forcibly implemented the name-changing process.

With regards to Suleymanov's name, it was difficult to change because Suleymanov's Bulgarian name, Naim Suleymanov, was recorded on the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF). If Suleymanov were to change his name, it would cause a dispute between the BWF and the IWF. For this reason, this process was put on hold as the Bulgarian officials needed to obtain approval from the IWF. After the pressure of the Soviet Union, the IWF regulations softened, and the organization approved to change Suleymanov's name to "Naum Shalamanov."⁷² With this, the communist officials aimed to quell the ethnic-Turks' resistance against the Bulgarization Project and other external political interests.

Weightlifting achievements not only showcased Suleymanov's name before a world-wide weightlifting community but also brought the Bulgarian government's attention to him from the viewpoint of manipulating him as a product of a flourishing and prosperous communist regime in Bulgaria. More importantly, the Bulgarian government intended to exploit him and his skills to discourage the rest of ethnic-Turks from resisting the assimilation campaign and, ultimately, the Bulgarization Project.⁷³ But, sensitive to his ethnic-religious (Muslim-Turkish) background, Suleymanov began to give morale

⁷¹ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 36, 37.

⁷² Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 23. Note: Suleymanov's name changing process was finalized when he returned home from Melbourne in 1985. More information can be found in Chapter 3.

⁷³ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 22:16.

encouragement to ethnic-Turks who had to endure the Bulgarization Project. By simply being a celebrated ethnic-Turkish athlete, he identified with that greater community (See **Image 5**).



Image 5: Suleymanov receives awards in front of his high-school teachers and various Bulgarian officials.

Source: Möller, “Türkiye Ve Dünya Tarihinin En Büyük Sporcularından Nam-ı Diğer Cep Herkülü: Naim Süleymanoğlu/One of the Best Athletes in History for both Turkey and the World, Recalling the Pocket Hercules: Naim Suleymanoglu.”

Suleymanov continued his training while the Bulgarian regime prohibited both emigration and immigration. A priority for the regime was to prevent drawing the world's attention to their nation while implementing the Bulgarization Project. If this assimilation case were to become the focus of an international dispute, it would inspire global protests to erupt against the Bulgarization Project, in addition to other consequences. Therefore, no famous athletes were allowed to leave, such as was the case with Suleymanov.⁷⁴ Athletes were closely monitored, and the only way that they could leave the country was by means of sporting events held abroad. Competing athletes had to agree to compete under the supervision of the Bulgarian authorities and follow the subsequent protocol that

⁷⁴ Ibid., 37:52.

was demanded by the government.⁷⁵ This included speaking only in Bulgarian, promoting communism, and never mentioning the assimilation campaigns. Also, athletes who did not yet have Slavic names had to change their names if they wished to compete in any national and international sporting events. These regulations made Suleymanov's presence even more significant. For instance, if he were to defect to Turkey, the truth about the Bulgarian government's perpetuation of the assimilation propaganda, which was used to control ethnic-Turks, would be exposed to the rest of the globe.

Suleymanov resisted and fought against Bulgarian officials to protest the restriction of his rights by refusing to change his name, by ignoring the religious restrictions and continuing to practice his Islamic beliefs.⁷⁶ He eventually began to alter his plans in the hopes of defecting to Turkey due to the excessive pressure that was placed on ethnic-Turks until 1986. His final decision to defect to Turkey would come later when the military-based Bulgarian officials forced him to renounce his name.

⁷⁵ TRTSPOR, "Bir Omur Spor-Naim Suleymanoglu/A Lifetime of Sports-Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, 5:37, last updated November 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGjLG-XITKs>.

⁷⁶ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 23:55.

Chapter 3

Naim Suleymanoglu's Defection, Moving to Turkey and His Influence on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria

3.1 The Defection Plan

In 1985, Suleymanov and the rest of the Bulgarian national weightlifting team ventured to Melbourne, Australia, for two weeks of training to prepare for the World Cup Weightlifting Championships, set to be held the following year.¹ Whilst at the preparation camp in Melbourne, Suleymanov was allowed to engage with the Turkish community living in Melbourne at that time.² It is worth noting here that many ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria, finally settling in Melbourne following the closure of World War II. Thus, when remnants of Melbourne's Turkish community learned of the Bulgarian team's arrival in Melbourne, they reached out to Suleymanov, and the subject of defecting from Bulgaria was raised.³ To do this, Rasim Arda, an ethnic-Turk who had escaped from Bulgaria to Melbourne, contacted Suleymanov.⁴ During this communication, Suleymanov hesitated about defecting to Turkey as his family was still in Bulgaria. Another reason why Suleymanov hesitated to defect was because he wanted to become the first weightlifter to win the World Cup Championships three times in a row.⁵ As a result, initial defection discussions were concluded unsuccessfully.

¹ While the Bulgarian national weightlifting team was preparing for the upcoming 1986 Melbourne World Cup Championships, the Bulgarian national team also participated in a small tournament in Melbourne.

² OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, last updated December 6, 2019, 1:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzlawT6JcQ&list=LLhd7ARL60KH3JQvT0ftV_nA&index=11&t=7s.

³ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 67.

⁴ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 15:58.

⁵ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 71.

While training at the Melbourne camp, the Bulgarian government informed Suleymanov that upon his return to Bulgaria, government authorities would be waiting to escort him from the Sofia airport to begin the name changing process, from which his name of Naim Suleymanov would become the Slavic name “Naum Shalamanov.”⁶ After the Bulgarian national weightlifting team landed at the Sofia airport in Bulgaria, a police-based government official awaited Suleymanov. His passport was confiscated, the first step is the name-changing process.⁷ Suleymanov, coerced into signing a statement indicating that he voluntarily changed his name, was taken to a radio station to announce his new name to Bulgarians. This act, engaged in by Suleymanov, was aimed at encouraging other ethnic-Turks to follow suit. Once the process was concluded, Suleymanov, now, Shalamanov, returned to his hometown of Kurdzhali. Based on his own account of these events, Shalamanov described this experience through the use of the analogy in which he exclaimed that the events felt like boiling water was being poured onto his head.⁸ “I would never accept losing my ethnic identity,” he stated.⁹ The name-changing process was the last straw for Shalamanov. Enver Turkileri recounted Shalamanov’s emotions as follows:

I found Naim alone. His eyes were full of tears, and his voice was shaky. His heart was broken, and I saw him crying in earnest. I, too, was stunned and did not know what to do... We talked for a long time to boost our morale a little. I am certain that Naim will never forget that day.¹⁰

⁶ As the elements of this study follow a chronological order, Naim Suleymanov was addressed as Naum Shalamanov until his defection to Turkey in 1986.

⁷ David Goldblatt, and Johnny Acton, *How to Watch the Olympics: an Instant Initiation into Every Sport at Rio 2016* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 353.

⁸ OdaTV, “Naim Suleymanoglu’nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story,” YouTube video, 2:04.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 24.

On that day, Shalamanov promised himself that he would defect to Turkey and expose the restrictions and oppressive treatment of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. He told no one of his intentions for fear of being found out; particularly by the Bulgarian government. The 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, Australia, presented a ripe opportunity for defection.¹¹

General Secretary of the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF), Nikola Mollov, did not sanction sending Shalamanov to the 1985 World Weightlifting Championships in Södertälje, Sweden; the Bulgarian Intelligence Agency was suspicious that Shalamanov was seeking an opportunity to defect.¹² It is worth highlighting here that while Shalamanov was competing at the 1985 European Weightlifting Championships in Katowice, Poland, he met with Mehmet Altin, a Turkish weightlifter who competed in Shalamanov's weight-class. Shalamanov expressed to Altin that he was not happy competing for Bulgaria under his new Slavic name, "Naum Shalamanov." He posed the thought of defecting to Turkey.¹³ This information was somehow leaked to the Bulgarian Intelligence Agency.

Consequently, Bulgarian officials planned to keep Shalamanov at home for the 1985 Södertälje World Weightlifting Championships, possibly replacing him with another Bulgarian weightlifter, Stefan Dimitrov, in the 60 kg. weight-class. However, two other weightlifters, Stephan Topurov and Zdravko Stoichkov, were unfortunately unable to participate due to their health and medical conditions.¹⁴ These incidents led to

¹¹ Peter Alfano, "THE SEOUL OLYMPICS: WEIGHTLIFTING; Intrigue on Way to Victory," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/22/sports/the-seoul-olympics-weightlifting-intrigue-on-way-to-victory.html>.

¹² Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 29.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

Shalamanov's participation in the 1985 Södertälje World Weightlifting Championships. He flew to Södertälje accompanied by national security guards, returning home as the gold medal winner.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter Shalamanov flew to Monte Carlo for the upcoming 1985 World Cup Weightlifting Championships staged in Monaco. Thus, in Monaco, Shalamanov became a World Cup winner in two successive championships.¹⁶ After Shalamanov won the gold medal in Monaco, the Bulgarian communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, invited him to his residence to congratulate him on his performance. During this meeting, Zhivkov bestowed "The Order of State" on Shalamanov.¹⁷ The Turkish media noted that Shalamanov was "the first Turk to make Zhivkov stand."¹⁸ A much motivated Shalamanov trained hard for the 1986 Sofia World Weightlifting Championships, where he won the gold medal.¹⁹

In 1986, the Bulgarian national weightlifting team, which included a newly renamed Shalamanov, flew to Melbourne from Sofia. The 1986 World Cup in Melbourne rekindled Shalamanov's thoughts of defection. After the Bulgarian team settled in at the hotel in Melbourne, Shalamanov's stress level increased for two reasons: (a) he could potentially become the first weightlifter to win three consecutive World Cup weightlifting titles,²⁰ (b) he might have the opportunity to defect after the conclusion of the tournament.

¹⁵ Shalamanov's winner lifts at the 1985 Södertälje World Weightlifting Championships as follows: 142.5 kg. in the snatch (world record), 180 kg. in the clean & jerk, and in total 322.5 kg. Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 33.

¹⁶ Shalamanov's lifts as follow: 145 kg. in the snatch, 186 in the clean & jerk and 331 kg. in total (world record). Source: Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 92.

¹⁷ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 93.

¹⁸ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 32.

¹⁹ Shalamanov's lifts at the 1986 Sofia World Championships as follows: 147.5 kg. in the snatch, 187.5 kg. in the clean & jerk and 335 kg. in total. Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 33.

²⁰ Sam Prenesti, "Shalamanov snatches world record and third World Cup," *The Age*, December 8, 1986, 32, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

These concerns created further stress and sleeplessness, which partially caused Shalamanov to lose weight before the competition. This prompted the head coach of the Bulgarian national weightlifting team, Ivan Abadjiev, to stall as the unexpected weight loss would affect Shalamanov's chances of winning a gold medal.²¹ Instead of reporting his current weight to the competition officials, Abadjiev ordered Shalamanov to gain a minimum of 2.5 kg.²² Usually, upon arrival at major international weightlifting competitions, weightlifters weighed 1 kg. over the allotted weight measurement. They would then participate in a sauna session before reporting their weights to the officials; thus, they would maintain their ideal weights for their respective weight classes. Shalamanov had, indeed, gained back the weight he lost and achieved his first mission by winning the gold medal. Remaining was his mission to find a way to defect.

After the weightlifting competitions, the Bulgarian team went to a restaurant to celebrate their success. Shalamanov sought an opportune moment to escape. However, he was so besieged with attention from his teammates after his historic gold medal performance, and the escape plans were compromised. When the team arrived at the Leonda restaurant, Bulgarian police officers guarding the Bulgarian team since it had departed from Sofia situated themselves at the same table with the weightlifters.²³ This unexpected decision caused Shalamanov to become even more anxious. Shalamanov had to re-think his defection plan. As everybody sat down and started having their dinner, Shalamanov saw Rasim Arda at the bar. Arda had initially planned for Shalamanov to escape from the hotel before going to the Leonda; however, the team suddenly decided to

²¹ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 4:38.

²² *Ibid.*, 5:10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7:26.

celebrate its success at a restaurant, first, then go to their hotel. Informed by the hotel receptionist as to where the Bulgarian team was celebrating, Arda preceded to the restaurant. After Arda and Shalamanov recognized each other across the restaurant, Arda tried to convey to Shalamanov, with his body language, that he would not be able to speak in person with Shalamanov as the police officers were constantly watching Shalamanov.²⁴ Shalamanov and one of his teammates then decided to smoke a cigarette at the bar. Shalamanov sat next to Arda. He indicated that the defection plan had been organized and set-in place.²⁵ Finally, Arda confirmed that once the team returned to the hotel, he would sneak Shalamanov out of the hotel to safety. However, Shalamanov resisted, not wanting to go back to the hotel. He wanted to escape right then and there from the Leonda.²⁶ Arda understood the level of Shalamanov's anxiety. He had previously organized for three vehicles to transport Shalamanov from the hotel. Arda quickly altered the plan, notifying Shalamanov that a white car would wait for him next to the restaurant to take Shalamanov away from the restaurant to a safe place.²⁷

Once Shalamanov returned to the dinner table, he waited a few minutes, and then made the claim that he had to use the restroom (**See Images 6 and 7**). Excusing himself, he made his way through the restaurant to the exit/entrance. The white car was awaiting. Shalamanov got in; the vehicle left the restaurant immediately.²⁸ *Los Angeles Times* journalist, Randy Harvey, stated that this was the last time that Bulgarian officials and the

²⁴ Ibid., 8:27.

²⁵ Ibid., 8:50.

²⁶ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 27:21.

²⁷ TRTSPOR, "Bir Omur Spor-Naim Suleymanoglu/A Lifetime of Sports-Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, 8:31.

²⁸ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 12.

Bulgarian weightlifting team saw Shalamanov in Melbourne.²⁹ Safely en route, Shalamanov was transferred between two more vehicles. One of Arda’s friends, Musa Sayan, brought Shalamanov to a “safe house,” where Shalamanov remained for several days.

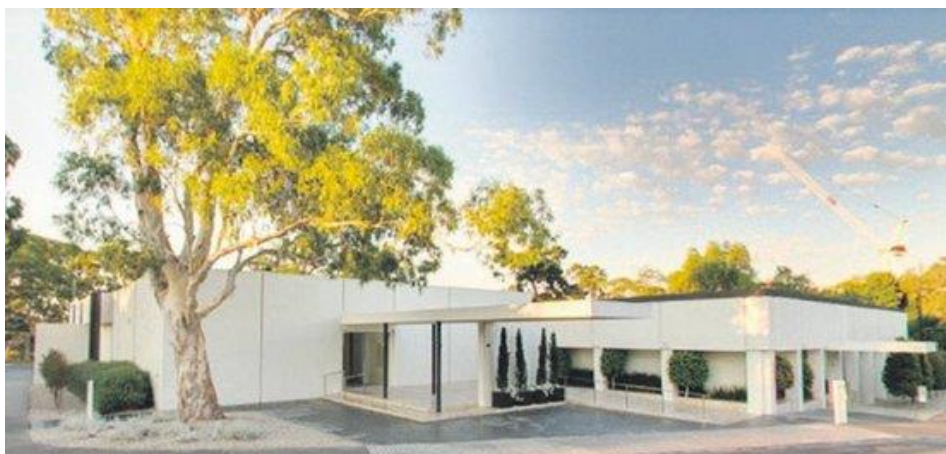


Image 6: The Bulgarian national team celebrated their success at the 1986 Melbourne World Cup Weightlifting Championships at the Leonda restaurant (the main entrance/front-side).

Source: Tayfun Er, “Ozal Dugmeye Basti, Naim’i Alip Gelin/Ozal’s Action, Bring Naim to Turkey,” *Takvim*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/yazarlar/tayfun.er/2017/11/21/ozal-dugmeye-bastinaimi-alip-gelin>.



Image 7: Naum Shalamanov escaped from the Leonda restaurant by using the back door.
Source: Ibid.

²⁹ Randy Harvey, “Defection of World Champion Catches Many By Surprise,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1986, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Arda remained at the Leonda restaurant, there being no vehicle for his departure. The Bulgarian officials soon noticed Shalamanov's absence. In the chaos and uproar that followed, Arda fled the Leonda through the kitchen.³⁰ In the meantime, Bulgarian officials ultimately announced that a terrorist organization had kidnapped Shalamanov;³¹ the international media broadcasts also presented their interpretive claim. There, police officers commenced an investigation into the case.

From this point on, everything was about to change for Shalamanov. For his defection to be legally supported, he needed to officially claim and seek asylum through the Turkish Embassy in Melbourne.³² Shalamanov and Arda contacted the Turkish Embassy and explained the situation; however, the Turkish Embassy officials did not believe Shalamanov. His request to seek asylum in Turkey was rejected. The main reason for the rejection was because Shalamanov held a Slavic name, which caused some confusion with the Turkish Embassy. After the rejection, there followed three days of ongoing telephone communication between Shalamanov and the Turkish Embassy; however, little substantial progress was made. Although Shalamanov's disappearance continued to be broadcast on multiple global news outlets, the Turkish Embassy still refused to believe that Shalamanov was an ethnic-Turk who had been living in Bulgaria. Panic set-in with Arda and his cohorts. If the Turkish Embassy would not accept Shalamanov's application, Arda and his group could be labelled as terrorists for having "kidnapped" a World Champion weightlifter, as the Bulgarian officials had originally theorized. An alternate plan would have to be developed: If Melbourne's Turkish

³⁰ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 10:37.

³¹ Alfano, "THE SEOUL OLYMPICS."

³² Goldblatt and Acton, *How to Watch the Olympics*, 353.

Embassy continued to reject Shalamanov's application, he would change his defection route goal from Turkey to the USA.³³ Shalamanov completed the application to seek asylum in the USA, but he never officially submitted it. He continued to hope that the Turkish Embassy might change its mind.

While Shalamanov was hiding in Melbourne, Bulgarian officials delivered Shalamanov's personal items to his family in Bulgaria.³⁴ Shalamanov's father, angry and upset, blamed Bulgarian officials for not protecting his son. Even though Shalamanov's father had deduced that his son was attempting to defect, he continued to rail at Bulgarian officials.³⁵ Notably, Shalamanov never mentioned to his family that he wanted to defect to Turkey.³⁶ The Bulgarian government sought to pressure Shalamanov's family to try and learn Shalamanov's whereabouts. However, Shalamanov's family knew nothing of where he was and couldn't confirm if he planned to defect or not. The family knew nothing about anyone who might have assisted him. In addition, Bulgarian officials also investigated Shalamanov's weightlifting coach, Enver Turkileri, to determine whether Shalamanov had defected or if he was kidnapped. Finally, Bulgarian officials concluded that Shalamanov did, in fact, attempt to defect. Shalamanov's defection had serious ramifications that would later increase the global awareness of the assimilation campaigns deployed against ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. A Bulgarian police chief in Kurdhzali stated to

³³ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 15:01.

³⁴ "Selam Turkiyem/Hello Turkey," *Hurriyet*, December 13, 1986, 1, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/>.

³⁵ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 13:36.

³⁶ Alfano, "THE SEOUL OLYMPICS."

Turkileri that if thousands of ethnic-Turks defected to Turkey, it would not have the same impact as Shalamanov's defection.³⁷

Meanwhile, the Turkish media closely followed the Shalamanov case, informing Turks about Shalamanov's identity and impending defection. Very quickly, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Vahit Melih Halefođlu, became aware of the Shalamanov's case. During the annual Turkish government Council of Ministers meeting in Ankara, Halefođlu briefed Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal on Shalamanov's situation.³⁸ Ozal prompted Halefođlu to address the matter with Ozal's advisor, Can Pulak, and Turkish diplomat, Selim Egeli.³⁹ After much deliberation, the Turkish bureaucrats contacted the Turkish Embassy in both Melbourne and Canberra, Australia, encouraging the acceptance of Shalamanov's application.⁴⁰

To transfer Shalamanov to Turkey, a mutual international agreement had to be organized between the Turkish and Australian governments. Prime Minister Ozal signalled full authority to the Turkish bureaucrats in Australia for Shalamanov's transport to Turkey. From this moment on, the Shalamanov case became a significant foreign matter for the Turkish government. Ozal himself interfaced with the Australian government to directly organize and manage Shalamanov's route to Turkey. On the fourth day after Shalamanov's escape from the Leonda restaurant, Australian police officers arrived at Musa Sayan's house to escort Shalamanov through the necessary

³⁷ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 36:24.

³⁸ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanođlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 16:01.

³⁹ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 128, 135.

⁴⁰ "In Weightlifting," *Calgary Herald*, December 13, 1986, 4, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

procedures to leave Australia, and seek asylum in Turkey.⁴¹ First, the officers queried Shalamanov to confirm that his decision to defect to Turkey was based on his own free will.⁴² Then, the officers took Shalamanov to the hospital to ensure that he had not been physically abused nor manipulated by those who had assisted him during his escape.⁴³ After the preliminaries were completed, the officers advised Shalamanov that everything was under the control of the Australian police.⁴⁴ Under an agreement between the Turkish and Australian governments, Shalamanov was issued a temporary passport under a different name while he travelled internationally.⁴⁵ The President of the BWF, Christo Meranzov, was incredulous that Australian officials allowed Shalamanov to leave Australia without an official passport in his own name.⁴⁶ To Meranzov, Shalamanov was still a Bulgarian citizen. This passport situation sparked a diplomatic conflict between Bulgaria and Australia in 1986.

During his international passage to safety, Shalamanov was escorted by Turkish advisor, Can Pulak. Shalamanov was to immediately fly to London, England, remain there for one night, stay at the Turkish Embassy, then fly to Turkey on Prime Minister Ozal's private jet.⁴⁷ Australian officials transported Shalamanov to the Melbourne airport,

⁴¹ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 17:24.

⁴² Tom Noble, Robert Honybun, and Edmund Doogue, "Tension and despair as the last door closes," *The Age*, December 13, 1986, 6, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴³ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 146.

⁴⁴ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 15.

⁴⁵ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 18:50.

⁴⁶ "Diplomatic row erupts over Bulgarian weightlifter," *The Age*, December 13, 1986, 6, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁷ Craig Neff, "HEROIC AND HERCULEAN," *Sports Illustrated Vault*, May 9, 1988, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1988/05/09/heroic-and-herculean-weightlifter-naim-suleymanoglu-was-as-mighty-as-ever-in-his-first-meet-abroad-since-his-daring-defection-from-bulgaria>.

warning Pulak, Shalamanov, and the pilot that Shalamanov was to remain safely inside the airplane during their layover in Dubai in case of a potential seizure by Bulgarian spies.⁴⁸ On December 12th, the plane landed in London without incident. An official vehicle was awaiting Shalamanov to take him to the Turkish Embassy.

As arranged, Shalamanov and Pulak stayed at the Turkish Embassy for one night. There, by telephone, Shalamanov conversed directly for the first time with Ozal.⁴⁹ Ozal assured Shalamanov that he would be flown safely to Turkey.⁵⁰ On the morning of the departure, a gaggle of journalists congregated in front of the Embassy. Somehow, Shalamanov's presence there had become known. He refused to participate in any interview sessions, as he remained wary of potential Bulgarian interference.

To safely transport Shalamanov to the London airport, a diversion plan was quickly executed. The embassy's head kitchen chef, nearly the same physical build as Shalamanov, dressed in an oversized jacket, a hat, and black sunglasses, was escorted out of the Turkish Embassy. The crowds of assembled journalists believed that it was indeed Shalamanov exiting the Embassy. The chef was ushered into an Embassy vehicle, and the journalists' cars followed.⁵¹ When the area was clear, the crowd disbanded, Shalamanov left the Embassy. When Shalamanov arrived at the London airport, Ozal's private jet was waiting for him.⁵² Remarkably, from London, England, to Ankara, Turkey, the shortest

⁴⁸ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 18:10.

⁴⁹ TRTSPOR, "Bir Omur Spor-Naim Suleymanoglu/A Lifetime of Sports-Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, 11:30.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 21:18.

⁵² TRTSPOR, "Bir Omur Spor-Naim Suleymanoglu/A Lifetime of Sports-Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, 9:58.

route included flying over Bulgaria. Accordingly, the decision was made to reroute the flight.⁵³

Throughout the course of his journey, Shalamanov was escorted by advisor Pulak and additional members of the Turkish Intelligence Organization (Turkish: *Türk İstihbarat Teskilati*, MIT). During the flight, Pulak explained to Shalamanov what to expect once they had landed in Ankara's military base airport.⁵⁴ The jet landed in Ankara on December 13th, 1986, where Prime Minister Ozal, as well as multiple journalists, were on hand to greet Shalamanov (**See Image 8**). It afforded Shalamanov an opportunity to speak freely for the first time since the beginning of his defection. A press conference was held, where he relayed his own personal experiences and explained the Bulgarian government's ongoing assimilation campaigns and tactics. Furthermore, Shalamanov stated that he was grateful to be in Turkey. He also spoke of becoming the voice of the suppressed ethnic-Turks who resided in Bulgaria, as well as compete at international competitions for Turkey, particularly at the Olympic Games.⁵⁵ Soon after, Ozal and Shalamanov established a close relationship; the Prime Minister even announced that he regarded Shalamanov as if he were his "stepson" (**See Image 9**).⁵⁶

⁵³ OdaTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu'nun Kacis Hikayesi/Naim Süleymanoğlu's Escape Story," YouTube video, 21:53.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 22:51.

⁵⁵ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 170.

⁵⁶ "Bir Naim Dünya'ya Bedel/A Naim Is Worth the World," *Türkiye*, September 21, 1988. 1, <https://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/>.



Image 8: On the right, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, introduces Naum Shalamanov, on the left, to the Turkish media for the first time after Shalamanov arrived in Turkey from London, England.

Source: “Ajanlar Savasiydi...Naim Suleymanoglu’nun unutulmaz fotoograflari/It was the War of Agents... Naim Suleymanoglu’s unforgettable photographs,” *Hurriyet*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/galeri-ajanlar-savasiydi-naim-suleymanoglunun-unutulmaz-fotoograflari-40650375/4>.

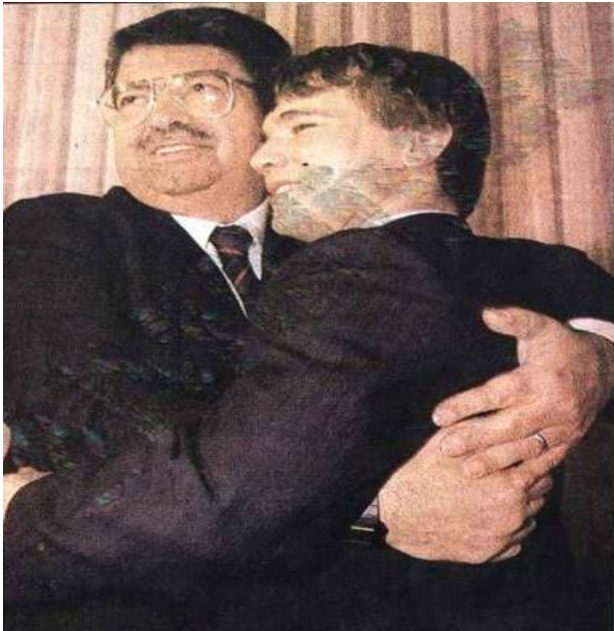


Image 9: Turkish Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, embraces Naim Suleymanoglu.
Source: “Naim’e/To Naim,” *Milliyet*, September 23, 1988, 1, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

Shalamanov's defection to Turkey prompted the international media to follow his case closely, focusing on the reasons why he decided to defect. In this vein, Shalamanov spoke out about Bulgaria's assimilation processes that literally engulfed ethnic-Turks during the communist era. After Shalamanov defected to Turkey, he concentrated on encouraging more ethnic-Turks, in Bulgaria to fight for their fundamental human rights. Shalamanov's defection produced anxieties within the ranks of the Bulgarian government. No longer could there be any denial of the existence of the Bulgarization Project. Later, with Shalamanov's rising success at the Olympic Games, notably at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, in South Korea, Bulgaria's communist regime and its Bulgarization Project would be confronted by multiple international governing bodies and media outlets.

3.2 Post-Defection and Conflict between the Turkish and Bulgarian Governments

In order to understand the confrontation between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments, it is worthwhile to briefly analyze Turkey's Prime Minister, Turgut Ozal, particularly his approaches to both domestic and foreign policies. On November 6th, 1983, Ozal's Motherland Party came to power in Turkey. Ozal was appointed Prime Minister, serving from 1983 to 1989. He then was elected President of Turkey, serving from 1989 to 1993.⁵⁷ In 1980, Kenan Evren successfully executed a military coup against the Turkish government and became the President of Turkey, serving from 1980 to 1989; however, his government's actions negatively affected Turkey's economy, as well as the

⁵⁷ Cihan Daban, "TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE DIŞ POLİTİKASI/The Foreign Policy of Turkey During Turgut Ozal Period," *Sosyal Ekonomik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 17, no. 33 (2017): 83.

country's democracy.⁵⁸ Subsequently, when Ozal was elected in 1983, his first public address focused on Turkey's economic issues and deteriorating democracy. In addition, Ozal also desired to maintain favourable and peaceful foreign relations with Turkey's neighbouring countries, particularly Bulgaria and Greece. Despite this, at a meeting in Stockholm, held by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ozal criticized the Bulgarian government, asking that President Zhivkov terminate the assimilation campaign against Bulgarian's ethnic-Turks.⁵⁹ Following the collapse of Bulgaria's communist regime, Ozal and the Bulgarian officials sought to build and maintain a new and much-improved relationship between Turkey and Bulgaria.

On December 15th, 1986, based on Article 6 and 7 of the Turkish Citizenship Law No. 403,⁶⁰ Shalamanov was granted Turkish citizenship by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.⁶¹ From that moment, "Naim Shalamanov" would henceforth be addressed as "Naim Suleymanoglu." It is worth mentioning, here, how Suleymanoglu's case was treated in the media. For example, the French sports newspaper *L'Equipe* published an article entitled: "Suleymanoglu Steered to the West."⁶² Another French newspaper, *Liberation*, published an article headlined: "18-year-old Bulgarian citizen ethnic-Turk Naim asked for political asylum."⁶³ News station *Australian TV* aired that Suleymanoglu

⁵⁸ İsmail Kurun, "YENİ SAĞ VE DEMOKRATİKLEŞME ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİ: TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE'Sİ ÖRNEĞİ/THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NEW RIGHT AND DEMOCRATIZATION: THE CASE OF TURGUT ÖZAL PERIOD IN TURKEY," *Mehmet Akif Ersoy Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 9, no. 22 (2017): 364.

⁵⁹ Daban, "TURGUT ÖZAL DÖNEMİ TÜRKİYE DIŞ POLİTİKASI/The Foreign Policy of Turkey During Turgut Ozal Period," 88.

⁶⁰ Article 6 and 7 of the Turkish Citizenship Law No. 403 indicates that those who are of Turkish origin can be granted Turkish citizenship, even if they were not born in Turkey.

⁶¹ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 173.

⁶² Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 50.

⁶³ Ibid.

was seeking to defect to Turkey.⁶⁴ *The Los Angeles Times* also published the title “Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise.”⁶⁵ Local media outlets in Turkey described Suleymanoglu’s defection as “Flying to His Freedom.”⁶⁶ In sum, various national and international media outlets covered Suleymanoglu’s defection.

The year of 1986 also prompted significant diplomatic discussions about Suleymanoglu’s sports career. Turkish and Bulgarian government officials discussed Suleymanoglu’s national identity as an athlete, as well as his weightlifting “licence.” The President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Juan Antonio Samaranch, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, the President of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, the President of the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF), Arif Nusret Say, the President of the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF), Christo Meranzov, and the President of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), Gottfried Schödl, engaged in ongoing correspondence in order to come to an agreement on Suleymanoglu’s official athlete status, and his weightlifting qualification.

Firstly, Turkey’s Arif Nusret Say contacted Bulgaria’s Christo Meranzov on the subject of Suleymanoglu competing for Turkey at the international level. Meranzov claimed that according to the official records documented by the BWF, Suleymanoglu was still considered to be Bulgarian, and that he had been moved to Turkey from Bulgaria against his will.⁶⁷ Minimal progress was made with these initial discussions. Based on the IWF’s regulations, the worst possible scenario for Suleymanoglu was that weightlifters

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁵ Harvey, “Defection of World Champion Catches Many By Surprise,” 57,

⁶⁶ “...Ve Suleymanov, Ozgurluge Uctu/...And Suleymanov Flew to His Freedom,” *Hurriyet*, December 14, 1986, 1, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/>.

⁶⁷ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 57.

who had either immigrated or defected could not compete internationally for at least one year.⁶⁸ In Suleymanoglu's case, he was ineligible to compete for Turkey until December 1987.⁶⁹ However, it should also be noted that both the IWF and IOC each function under separate and individual regulations. If neither was unable to decide upon a mutual agreement, then the IWF's one-year abstention rule would extend to three-years for athletes who sought to compete in the Olympic Games.⁷⁰ In other words, if the BWF disapproved of Suleymanoglu competing for Turkey, he would then automatically have to wait until the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games to compete for Turkey.⁷¹ Suleymanoglu, who had missed participating in the 1984 L.A. Games because of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc's boycott of the Games, then would potentially have to miss the 1988 Seoul Games. Securing an agreement between parties was critical. Thus, Turkish officials had to develop an alternate approach to secure Suleymanoglu's status as a Turkish weightlifter.

On March 12th, 1987, in Athens, during the annual IWF meeting, Turkish and Bulgarian delegates came together to discuss the Suleymanoglu case.⁷² IWF president Gottfried Schödl also participated in the meeting. The Bulgarian delegates claimed that Suleymanoglu was kidnapped in Melbourne, and that he was forced to compete for Turkey; thus, they would not grant their approval to Turkey.⁷³ In response to this, the

⁶⁸ David Porter and Amruta Slee, "Weightlifter tells police he wants to stay," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 11, 1986, 7, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁹ Neff, "HEROIC AND HERCULEAN."

⁷⁰ Neff, "Little Big Man Pound for Pound."

⁷¹ Tayfun Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules* (Istanbul/Turkey: A7 Kitap Yayıncılık, 2018), 29.

⁷² "Naim Kendini Atınada Savunacak/Naim Will Defend Himself in Athens," *Milliyet*, January 22, 1987, 15, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

⁷³ "Naim İcin Karar Günü/Decision Day for Naim," *Milliyet*, March 12, 1987, 13, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

Turkish delegates argued that Suleymanoglu freely and independently made the decision to defect to Turkey.⁷⁴ After four and a half hours of debating, the following decision, one that satisfied the IWF and IOC, was made: for one year, Suleymanoglu would have to abstain from participating in all international competitions, except for the Olympic Games. Suleymanoglu received this news from *Milliyet* journalist Reha Muhtar (**Image 10**). Although Suleymanoglu's case with the IWF was resolved, left unresolved was approval from the Bulgarian Olympic Committee (BOC). Suleymanoglu's chance to represent Turkey at the 1988 Seoul Games was at stake.



Image 10: Naim Suleymanoglu received the news from Reha Muhtar regarding the IWF's decision. Source: "Dünya Şampiyonu Bitmek Bilmeyen Dakikalari/Endless Minutes of the World Champion," *Milliyet*, March 13, 1987. 13, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

According to the IWF regulations, Suleymanoglu was unable to compete for Turkey in the 1987 European, nor the 1987 World Championships. This constituted a partial victory for Suleymanoglu; his ultimate goal, however, was to compete at the Olympic Games. The IWF President Schödl was a strong supporter of Suleymanoglu and enthusiastically spoke out in favour of Suleymanoglu's participation in the 1988 Seoul

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Games.⁷⁵ To further express his support, in the early part of 1988, Schödl visited Suleymanoglu at a local weightlifting tournament held in Antalya, Turkey (See **Image 11**).

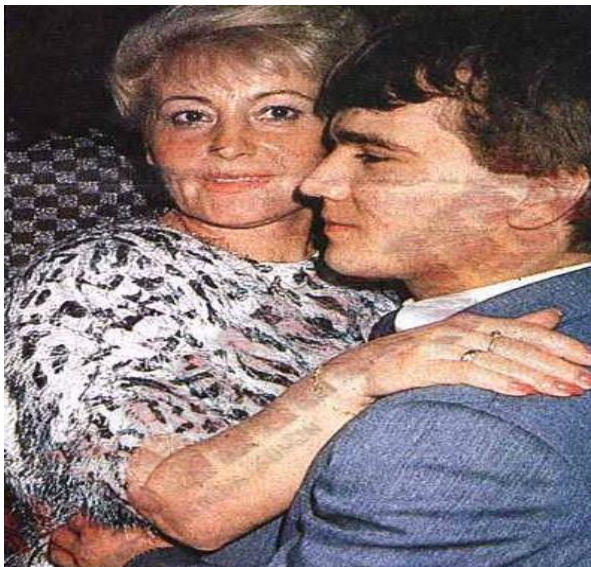


Image 11: Naim Suleymanoglu is dancing with Gottfried Schödl's wife, Eva Schödl, after the Antalya tournament.

Source: "Super Adam' in Dansi/Dance of the Superman," *Milliyet*, December 21, 1987, 1, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

The 1988 European Weightlifting Championships held in Cardiff, Wales, presented an opportunity to close the Suleymanoglu case. There the IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch requested a meeting with the Bulgarian Olympic Committee (BOC), and the Turkish delegations. He dearly wanted to come up with a solution for Suleymanoglu's case prior to the 1988 Seoul Games.⁷⁶ Prior to the Cardiff meeting, Samaranch visited Suleymanoglu in Istanbul, Turkey, once again conveying his support for Suleymanoglu's Turkish representation at the 1988 Seoul Games.⁷⁷ At the Cardiff

⁷⁵ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 58.

⁷⁶ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Hekulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 17.

⁷⁷ TRTAVAZ, "Naim Suleymanoglu ve Hayati/Naim Suleymanoglu and His Life." YouTube video, 14:46, last updated January 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGtGGxfOa04>.

meeting, aside from Samaranch, the attendees included the President of the BWF, Meranzov, the President of the TWF, Arif Nusret Say, and the General Directorate of Sports of Turkey, Kemal Kamiloglu. Suleymanoglu's case was nearly solved then and there. But a monetary sticking point remained. Bulgarian authorities requested \$2.5 million U.S. dollars in compensation from Turkey.⁷⁸ The negotiation process at this point floundered to reach a solution; however, Bulgarian and Turkish officials finally agreed to another meeting in Sofia.⁷⁹ In addition, Meranzov requested a signed, hand-written letter from Suleymanoglu which outlined all the events that transpired prior to his defection and to essentially verify, again, that he had been honest with the circumstances under which he had defected.

At the 1988 European Weightlifting Championships in Cardiff, two thoughts weighed heavily on Suleymanoglu's conscience. Firstly, both Bulgarian and Turkish media channels questioned whether Suleymanoglu had been able to maintain his athletic training and whether he was fully prepared for the Championship; Suleymanoglu felt that he had to prove himself worthy of his place in the competition.⁸⁰ Secondly, the head coach of the Bulgarian national weightlifting team, Ivan Abadjiev, was also present in Cardiff.⁸¹ Suleymanoglu and Abadjiev had established a close relationship when Suleymanoglu had been a part of the national Bulgarian weightlifting team. Before the Cardiff competition, Suleymanoglu and Abadjiev met for the first time since Suleymanoglu's defection. Suleymanoglu kissed Abadjiev's hand and put it to his

⁷⁸ Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules*, 39, 40.

⁷⁹ Neff, "HEROIC AND HERCULEAN."

⁸⁰ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," YouTube video, 42:04.

⁸¹ TRTAVAZ, "Naim Suleymanoglu ve Hayati/Naim Suleymanoglu and His Life," YouTube video, 16:40.

forehead.⁸² In Turkey, this is a traditional method of showing respect. The two former friends hugged and conversed with each other. However, Suleymanoglu had to maintain his concentration as Abadjiev brought one of Bulgaria's best lifters, Stefan Topurov, to compete against Suleymanoglu in the 60 kg. weight-class.

As expected, followers of weightlifting eagerly awaited for the contest to begin between Topurov of Bulgaria, and Suleymanoglu of Turkey in the 60 kg. weight-class. At the 1988 Cardiff European Weightlifting Championships, Suleymanoglu lifted 150 kg. in the snatch, which was a world record, 180 kg. in the clean & jerk, and, in total, lifted 330 kg.; he became the first weightlifter in history to snatch 2½ times his body weight.⁸³ Topurov lifted 145 kg. in the snatch, 177.5 kg. in the clean & jerk, and, in total, lifted 322.5 kg.⁸⁴ Suleymanoglu earned the gold medal; Topurov, the silver. Suleymanoglu's performance proved that he remained one of the top weightlifters in the world (**See Image 12**). At the press conference following the competition, Suleymanoglu raised the problem of how ethnic-Turks were treated in Bulgaria; however, he was carefully selective with his choice of words, not wanting to antagonize Bulgarian officials before the Sofia meeting where the final solution of his case was to be reached.

The significance of the 1988 Cardiff European Championships for Turkey is showcased in two ways. Firstly, Turkey won its first gold medal in weightlifting at the international level. Secondly, Suleymanoglu competed for Turkey at an international level for the first time in history. This championship marked the beginning of a golden era for Turkey in weightlifting history.

⁸² Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 59.

⁸³ Neff, "HEROIC AND HERCULEAN."

⁸⁴ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 61.

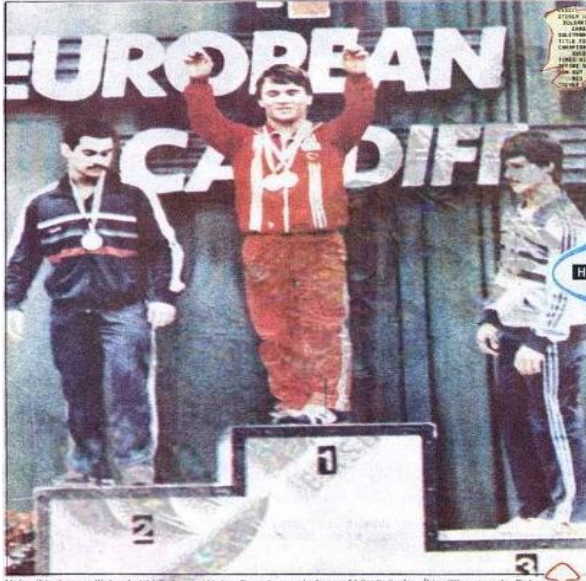


Image 12: Naim Suleymanoglu is celebrating his gold medal win at the 1988 Cardiff European Weightlifting Championships with his opponents. On the far left, silver medalist Stephan Topurov of Bulgaria and, on the far right, bronze medalist Attila Czanka of Romania.

Source: Huseyin Kircali, “Dünyada İlk Kez Kendi Vücudunun 2.5 Katini Kaldiran Adam/The Man Who Lifted 2.5 Times of His Body Weight for The First Time in The World,” *Milliyet*, April 28, 1988, 16, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

On May 4th, 1988, Kamiloglu and Arif Say made their way to Sofia to meet with the Bulgarian delegation towards finalizing Suleymanoglu’s case.⁸⁵ After an extensive negotiation process, a payment of⁸⁶ \$1,250,000 U.S. dollars was made by the Turkish National Sources to the Bulgarian officials for Suleymanoglu’s weightlifting licence, qualifying him for the upcoming 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.⁸⁷ There was no official declaration of the payment made by either the Bulgarian or the Turkish governments. Thus, the amount of money estimated to have been paid for Suleymanoglu’s licence

⁸⁵ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 238.

⁸⁶ The Turkish media indicated that the payment for Suleymanoglu’s license was \$1,250,000 U.S. dollars, and Suleymanoglu was not aware of the transaction at that time because the Turkish government did not declare any official payment. However, Prime Minister Ozal later admitted that the payment had been made. Source: TRTAVAZ, “Naim Suleymanoglu ve Hayati/Naim Suleymanoglu and His Life,” YouTube video, 15:30.

⁸⁷ Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules*, 39, 59.

differed between documented sources. For instance, Alfano states that the amount was \$1,500,000 U.S. dollars,⁸⁸ whereas Turkileri notes that it was \$1,070,000 U.S. dollars.⁸⁹ The Turkish National Olympic Committee (TNOc) announced that it was \$1,000,000 U.S. dollars.⁹⁰ Prime Minister Ozal took an active role in the payment made for Suleymanoglu's "license."⁹¹ Ozal arranged for Turkish National Sources to cover the payment.⁹² The transaction was not handled through regular banking methods; Turkish officials delivered the payment in suitcases containing cash notes. Bulgarian officials met Turkish officials at the border between Turkey and Bulgaria known as the Kapikule Border Gate.⁹³ Later in his political career, Ozal was criticized by the Turkish media and politicians for using national sources for Suleymanoglu's "rescue," when other prospective national "emergency" cases demanded attention. In response to this, Ozal stated that Suleymanoglu had already paid enough for having advertised Turkish societies to the world, for promoting weightlifting in Turkey to youths, and for encouraging ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to immigrate to Turkey.⁹⁴ It is worth noting here that Suleymanoglu's family was not allowed to leave Bulgaria at that time, a fact that tempered Suleymanoglu's joyful satisfaction with his defection's end.⁹⁵ With much support and

⁸⁸ Alfano, "THE SEOUL OLYMPICS."

⁸⁹ Turkileri, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 59.

⁹⁰ "Olimpiyatlarda Türkler/Turks are in the Olympics," Turkish National Olympic Committee, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://olimpiyatkomitesi.org.tr/Detay/Olimpiyatlar/Olimpiyatlarda-Turkler/45/1>.

⁹¹ Irmak Hürmeriç Altunsöz and Settar Kocak, "Olimpiyat Oyunları'nda Sporcu Devşirilmesi/Recruitment of Athletes at the Olympic Games," *Spor Bilimleri Dergisi*, 28, no. 3 (2017): 120.

⁹² Taspınar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 17.

⁹³ Bayındır, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules*, 39, 59.

⁹⁴ Taspınar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 17.

⁹⁵ Neff, "HEROIC AND HERCULEAN."

effort contributed by Ozal, Suleymanoglu's family immigrated to Turkey in late 1988.

This will be discussed further in the thesis.

In sum, with Prime Minister Ozal's optimism in fostering mutual foreign relationships and the Turkish delegations' constant negotiation efforts, Bulgarian officials finally allowed Suleymanoglu to participate in the 1988 Seoul Games. These Games held much significance and offered important consequences for both Naim Suleymanoglu and ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. The possibility of Suleymanoglu winning a gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Games encouraged ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to rally their exodus against the communist Bulgarian government. Winning in Seoul, in particular, would also include press conferences or, rather, globally broadcast platforms where Suleymanoglu might speak freely about the Bulgarian government's treatment of ethnic-Turks. The 1988 Seoul Games are also significant for Turkey in that the nation had never brought home a gold medal from the Olympic Games in any sport other than wrestling.

3.3 Naim Suleymanoglu's Influence on Ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria

3.3.1 The 1989 Emigration Process from Bulgaria to Turkey

After World War II, the officials of Bulgaria's communist regime attempted to reduce the number of ethnic-Turks inhabiting Bulgaria by means of controlling the flow of emigration and deploying assimilation practices.⁹⁶ Between 1950 and 1951, 154,393 ethnic-Turks were forced to leave Bulgaria and to settle in Turkey.⁹⁷ From 1969 to 1978, 114,356 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria as a result of the signing of a

⁹⁶ Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria," 31.

⁹⁷ In 1969, Turkey and Bulgaria signed a ten-year bilateral agreement that aimed to reunite families who immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria between 1950-1951. This bilateral agreement expired in 1978. Notably, families had to prove a family member had immigrated to Turkey between 1950-1951, otherwise, they were not allowed to move to Turkey. Consequently, the border between Bulgaria and Turkey was closed until late 1989. Source, Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria," 32.

ten-year immigration agreement between Turkey and Bulgaria.⁹⁸ In 1978, the emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey nearly ceased due to the expiration of the bilateral agreement.

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, the Bulgarian government embarked on a mission of creating a single-nation state through the assimilation of ethnic-Turks. This process was called the “Bulgarization Project.” In the 1980s, communist Bulgarian leader, Todor Zhivkov, widened the assimilation campaign against ethnic-Turks. As noted in Chapter two, the assimilation campaign forbade ethnic-Turks from speaking their native-language, practicing the Islamic religion, and made it mandatory for ethnic-Turks to change their names from Islamic to Slavic names. In 1986, some of those who served to implement the Bulgarization Project were rewarded by the Bulgarian government. For instance, 179 Bulgarian officers received “the Order of the State” from the Interior Minister of Bulgaria.⁹⁹ Zhivkov also received the Order.¹⁰⁰

In response to the Bulgarization Project, ethnic-Turks began taking action against the Bulgarian government. To protest Zhivkov’s assimilation policies, many hunger strikes occurred, and many ethnic-Turks were arrested and imprisoned. While the initial number of people participating in the hunger strikes was about thirty, this figure reached 200 in May of 1989; one month later, it exceeded 1000.¹⁰¹ However, implementing the Bulgarization Project by the use of state-power and authority had limited success in silencing ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria.¹⁰² In 1978, after the expiry of the bilateral agreement

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Haydar E. Akin, "Etnik Partiden Ulusal Partiye Bulgaristan'da Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi/From Ethnic Party to National Party Movement of Rights and Freedoms in Bulgaria" (master's thesis: İstanbul Üniversitesi/Istanbul University, 2015), 69.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Atasoy and Soykan, “Freedom walk of the Turks in Bulgaria,” 117.

¹⁰² Küçükcan, "Re-claiming identity," 57.

between Turkey and Bulgaria, the borders between Bulgaria and Turkey were closed. Additionally, the Bulgarian government implemented emigration restrictions preventing ethnic-Turks from attempting to flee to Turkey. A decade later, the Bulgarian government and Zhivkov, lost their hold over the controlled immigration, which resulted in thousands of ethnic-Turks immigrating to Turkey after residing under Bulgaria's communist regime for almost a half-century.

One influential factor that contributed to the 1989 exodus to Turkey was Naim Suleymanoglu. He became a voice for ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria largely through his celebrity and sporting achievements. Publicly expressed utterances brought awareness to the plight of Bulgaria's ethnic-Turks. From various platforms, Suleymanoglu spoke out about how the communist Bulgarian government was assimilating ethnic-Turks into Bulgarian society. Suleymanoglu's voice encouraged ethnic-Turks to fight for their rights against the Bulgarian government.

3.3.2 Naim Suleymanoglu's Effect on the 1989 Exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey

The 1989 exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey is a significant event for two reasons. Firstly, the 1989 exodus was the largest population movement in Eastern-Europe since World War II.¹⁰³ Secondly, the 1989 exodus contributed to the collapse of Zhivkov's regime in late 1989, and subsequently, the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1990. Suleymanoglu's impact on the 1989 exodus, in part, can be attributed to a number of successes. His growing popularity at both international competitions and the Olympic Games painted him as a role model in the eyes of many ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. Speaking out at press conferences exemplified Suleymanoglu's use of media channels to

¹⁰³ Koksall and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 122.

express growing concern surrounding the Bulgarization Project publicly. Additionally, Suleymanoglu's close relationship with Turkey's President Turgut Ozal proved important.

Suleymanoglu's gold medal successes at the Summer Olympic Games in Seoul (1988), Barcelona (1992), and Atlanta (1996), as well as successes at numerous other international competitions, acted as catalysts that inspired many ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to escape to Turkey by defection. The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu's first Olympic experience, proved to be a milestone for him.¹⁰⁴ One weightlifter that fled to Turkey was Huben Hubenov, also known as "Halil Mutlu."¹⁰⁵ Mutlu closely followed Suleymanoglu's career. According to Mutlu, when Suleymanoglu won the gold medal at the 1982 World Junior Championships in Sao Paulo, Brazil, he became a role model in the ethnic-Turkish community, which encouraged Mutlu to begin weightlifting in Bulgaria.¹⁰⁶ Later in his career, Mutlu would become known as "Dynamo," after breaking more than twenty world records and winning three consecutive Olympic gold medals in weightlifting.¹⁰⁷ This particular case is significant as it displays how Naim Suleymanoglu inspired Turkish origin-based athletes to follow in his footsteps, prompting an eventual change in the Olympic landscape for ethnic-Turkish athletes such as Muharrem Suleymanoglu (Naim Suleymanoglu's brother) and Nazif Suleymanoglu (not related to

¹⁰⁴ At the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu performed extraordinarily, winning the gold medal. His success at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games made it possible to publicly disclose information about the Bulgarization Project at press conferences. This continued to inspire ethnic-Turks to follow in his footsteps. Details of Suleymanoglu's performance at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games can be found in Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁵ Halil Mutlu immigrated to Turkey in 1989.

¹⁰⁶ TRTAVAZ, "Naim Suleymanoglu ve Hayati/Naim Suleymanoglu and His Life," 25:09.

¹⁰⁷ "Halil Mutlu," Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF), last modified March 7, 2020, <https://halter.gov.tr/halil-mutlu/>.

Naim Suleymanoglu), Halil Mutlu, Erdinc Aslan, Sunay Bulut, and Fedail Guler.¹⁰⁸ In summation, with Suleymanoglu's influence, Bulgarian athletes arrived in Turkey during the 1989 exodus, prompting a promotion of weightlifting in Turkey. Soon after, Turkey entered a golden age of weightlifting.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, when Suleymanoglu defected to Turkey in 1986, the local media in Turkey and global media broadcast it as breaking news. This marked the beginning of Suleymanoglu's public rhetoric concerning the Bulgarization Project. His first public appearance is as follows:

I could not stay in Bulgaria due to the assimilation campaigns deployed against the ethnic-Turks. Someone had to explain it to the world. That was one of the main reasons why I escaped from Bulgaria... Bulgars are oppressing ethnic-Turks. Perhaps, the oppression by the Bulgarian government is twenty times what many say. Many have died. They attacked with tanks. However, I do not know how many ethnic-Turks have died. They do not share that.¹¹⁰

Subsequent to Suleymanoglu's defection, his meeting with the President of Turkey, Kenan Evren, was the main news story in Turkey (**Image 13**). The Evren/Suleymanoglu meeting's agenda focused on discussing the Bulgarization Project. After the meeting, Evren stated that ethnic-Turks should be able to move freely from Bulgaria to Turkey.¹¹¹ In addition to Evren's statement, Turkish politicians evaluated their foreign relations with the Bulgarian government in order to deal with the Bulgarization Project. Simultaneously,

¹⁰⁸ Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 69.

¹⁰⁹ Before Suleymanoglu's defection, Turkey had never won any medals in international weightlifting. Since Suleymanoglu's defection in 1986, Turkey has earned eight gold, one silver, and two bronze medals in the Olympic Games's weightlifting category. With these results, weightlifting became the second most successful sport for Turkey at the Olympic Games, after wrestling. Source: "Spor Branşlarına Göre Madalya Dağılımı/Medal Rankings According to Sport Disciplines," Turkish National Olympic Committee, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.olimpiyatkomitesi.org.tr/Olimpiyat-Madalyalarimiz>.

¹¹⁰ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 170.

¹¹¹ "Süleymanoğlu'na Büyük Sevgi/Great Love for Suleymanoglu," *Milliyet*, December 14, 1986, 1, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

Turkish politicians also amplified their criticism against the Bulgarian government due to its implementation of various assimilation tactics. As a result, Suleymanoglu's defection led to extensive local media coverage of the Bulgarian government's assimilation campaign deployed against the ethnic-Turks.



Image 13: Suleymanoglu (lower right) kisses the hand of the President of Turkey, Kenan Evren, which is a traditional way of showing respect in Turkey.

Source: "Süleymanoğlu'na Büyük Sevgi/Great Love for Suleymanoglu," *Milliyet*, December 14, 1986, 1, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr/>.

In addition to local Turkish media coverage, global media paid attention to the reasons behind Suleymanoglu's defection, resulting in creating global awareness of how ethnic-Turks were treated in Bulgaria during the communist era. However, in order to further attract the attention of the world media, and that of human rights organizations as well, Suleymanoglu stated: "I felt that I had to be a success at the Olympic Games and gain further global recognition in order to globally disclose the Bulgarization Project."¹¹² For this reason, Suleymanoglu increased the intensity of his training program before the

¹¹² MeltemTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu," YouTube video, 12:50, posted by Halit Elifbas (the reporter), last updated November 24, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFQwDfQj4gg&list=LL&index=41>.

1988 Seoul Games. Notably, prior to the 1988 Seoul Games, Suleymanoglu competed for Turkey at the 1988 European Weightlifting Championships staged in Cardiff, Wales. This was the first time in history that Turkey won a gold medal in international weightlifting.

At the Championship's press conference, Suleymanoglu stated:

During the competition, I thought of the 50 million Turks in Turkey and ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. After I defected to Turkey from Bulgaria, I worked hard. I am happy to be in Turkey. I have no desire but to be with my family. The Bulgarian government changed my name. They also oppressed and tortured ethnic-Turks. I could not live and continue my weightlifting career in Bulgaria after they changed my name. That is the reason why I defected. The Bulgarian media claims that I am not happy, but this is not true. I am very happy in Turkey. I am also very happy to explain to the world how the Bulgarian government is assimilating ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. Happiness greater than this [living safely in Turkey] cannot be thought of.¹¹³

After Suleymannoglu performed extraordinarily at the 1988 Seoul Games, he became the center of attention in the international media. He continued to disclose information about the emotional consequences that he faced due to the Bulgarization Project. At a press conference in Seoul, he expressed that:

I like to win, always. I am very happy I did something for my country. I am very proud of it... I never thought of leaving Bulgaria until then [the name changing process]. I wanted to keep my name. There are a million people in Bulgaria whose names were changed, and mine was among them... I have not seen my family in two years. I am very sad that I have not seem them. I would like to ask – to demand – that the Bulgarian authorities allow them to come to Turkey.¹¹⁴

The ensuing interview session took place with journalist Peter Alfano of *The New York Times*. During the interview, Suleymanoglu divulged that:

¹¹³ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 224.

¹¹⁴ "Pocket Hercules: world's strongest 132-pound man," *The Herald News*, September 21, 1988, 23, <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

The Turks [ethnic-Turks], though, are discriminated against, and are not allowed to follow their Moslem [Muslim] religion, speak their language, or practice their customs. The final outrage was when the government [The Bulgarian government] gave me a new name, Naum Shalamanov. It is very difficult to explain, but a name is a person's character and image. I felt I was nobody. It was as if they gave me a number.¹¹⁵

Similarly, news journalist Christine Brennan published an article in *The Washington Post* that discussed Suleymanoglu's influence on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. Wrote Brennan:

His [Suleymanoglu] victory [1988 Seoul Games] gave Turkey its first Olympic gold medal in 20 years and sent Turks everywhere into ecstasy...Simply, an athletic hero, he quickly became a symbol to more than 900,000 Bulgarians of Turkish origin, people such as himself who remain subject to discriminatory practices by the Bulgarian government.¹¹⁶

Suleymanoglu's speeches at the press conferences of highly prestigious weightlifting tournaments, such as the Olympic Games and the European Weightlifting Championships, as well as newspaper and sport magazine articles that covered his life and his efforts, had an enormous impact which captured the world's attention. Ultimately, Suleymanoglu's speeches helped influence ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to stand up to the communist Bulgarian government, which resulted in the intensification of protests against the government.

Subsequently, in late 1988, Suleymanoglu was invited to the USA to meet with the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, Richard Shifter (1985-1992), to discuss the Bulgarization dilemma. After the meeting, the U.S. authorities announced that they would support Turkey and work on establishing an "immigration agreement" between Turkey and Bulgaria to allow for ethnic-Turks to

¹¹⁵ Alfano, "THE SEOUL OLYMPICS."

¹¹⁶ Christine Brennan, "POCKET HERCULES' VISITS A PILLAR OF WHITE HOUSE," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1988/12/07/pocket-hercules-visits-a-pillar-of-white-house/1caf1007-a8fb-435b-8a63-212b12898bfb/>.

immigrate to Turkey freely.¹¹⁷ The Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs report noted that ethnic-Turks were under the Bulgarian government's oppression.¹¹⁸ This report can be understood as the first international recognition of the Bulgarization Project.

Suleymanoglu was active in Washington. He was invited to the White House by President Ronald Reagan. Furthermore, Suleymanoglu gave a speech at the United Nations headquarters in New York.¹¹⁹ Peter Alfano recounted Suleymanoglu's speech as follows:

In 1984, the Bulgarian government instituted a policy that denied the Turkish minority - representing about 20 percent of the total population - the right to speak Turkish, follow the Moslem [Muslim] religion or practice their customs. The Bulgarians gave the Turkish people new names. They [the Bulgarian officials] implemented the policy with tanks, guns, police, and soldiers as well as heavy fines and imprisonment.¹²⁰

Suleymanoglu's effort in the United States underlined the communist Bulgarian government's assimilation campaign, and in fact, brought it to the attention of several human rights organizations.

In light of the exposure of Bulgaria's treatment of ethnic-Turks, organizations such as the Helsinki Human Rights Watch (American-based non-governmental organization), Amnesty International (based in London, England), and The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, based in Vienna, Austria) began investigating the Bulgarization Project as part of the accusations that had come to pass in response to Bulgaria's violation of human rights.¹²¹ The particular organizations noted

¹¹⁷ "Naim'e Yeni Gorev/New Mission to Naim," *Milliyet*, September 28, 1988, 12, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹¹⁸ İbrahim Kamil, *İkili ve çok taraflı siyasi antlaşmalar, insan haklarına ilişkin belgeler ve Bulgar anayasasına göre Bulgaristan'daki Türklerin hakları/Bilateral and multilateral political treaties, documents on human rights and the rights of ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria according to the Bulgarian constitution* (Ankara: Yükseköğretim Kurulu Matbaası, 1989), 71.

¹¹⁹ Alfano, "Weight Lifting."

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ "Uyandılar/They Woke Up," *Milliyet*, June 15, 1989, 13, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

above are significant in that they were established to globally monitor the respect, or lack thereof, for human rights. The Bulgarization Project also received attention in France, Belgium, and England, each of which declared that they would monitor the assimilation campaigns and “track” the 1989 exodus.¹²² It is worth noting here that, in 1989, a French Television Broadcast featured Suleymanoglu discussing the Bulgarization Project. He lectured that; “ethnic-Turks are being killed or tortured in Bulgaria. It is a pity that the world remains silent in the face of these events... I urge the whole world to protest the Bulgaria persecution.”¹²³

After Suleymanoglu’s defection from Bulgaria to Turkey in 1989, Turgut Ozal and Suleymanoglu established a strong relationship, resulting in Ozal calling Suleymanoglu his “stepson.” On May 29th, 1989, Bulgaria’s President, Zhivkov, was forced to give a speech outlining a new approach to immigration policies through Bulgaria's local media channels. The core element of the speech is as follows:

Bulgarian citizens could leave Bulgaria whenever they wish to. Every Bulgarian citizen can use their immigration rights without dealing with any obligations. For people in Bulgaria who converted to Islam while under the Ottoman Empire rule, Bulgaria is their own land. I [Zhivkov] believe real Bulgarians will continue to live within these lands. I want to call on Turkey’s officials. Open your borders for Muslim-Bulgarians [ethnic-Turks]. Accept them either temporarily or permanently in Turkey. Turkey needs to open its borders based on international agreements.¹²⁴

Zhivkov’s speech exemplifies how the Bulgarian government finally sought to alleviate the international pressure that had forced him and the Bulgarization Project into the

¹²² “Sofya, Hesap Ver/Sofia, Explain It,” *Milliyet*, October 2, 1989, 14, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹²³ “Naim Fransız TV’sinde Bulgaristan’i kinadi/Naim condemn Bulgaria on French TV,” *Milliyet*, July 22, 1989, 16, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹²⁴ Emin Atasoy, “Postsosyalist Dönemde Bulgaristan’da Yaşanan Demografik Kriz ve Yansımaları/The Demographic Crisis in Bulgaria During the Post-Socialist Period and Its Reflections,” *Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 8, no. 12 (2007): 7.

spotlight. In response to Zhivkov's speech, Ozal communicated with Suleymanoglu as to whether the ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria would come to settle in Turkey.¹²⁵ Shortly after, at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting held in Brussels, Ozal announced that Turkey would open its borders to the ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria.¹²⁶ Soon after, during the summer of 1989, the exodus began.

In summary, the exodus was only possible after Suleymanoglu was able to gather enough support to exert pressure on international media outlets. In particular, the 1988 Seoul Games, where Suleymanoglu performed extraordinarily well, became a central focus of the international media. This pressure was also generated through the relationship that Suleymanoglu developed with the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal. Finally, as Suleymanoglu's voice was heard globally, he effectively disclosed the oppression of the Bulgarian government on ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria by using global media channels, the United Nations, and human rights organizations. Subsequently, both Western-European countries and the USA began criticizing the communist regime in Bulgaria, prompting recognized human rights organizations to become involved.

3.3.3 The Results of the Bulgarization Project

By far, the largest part of the exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey occurred in the summer of 1989. According to Eminov, after Bulgaria and Turkey opened their borders, between June and August, it was recorded that over 350,000 Muslim-Turks left Bulgaria for Turkey during the exodus.¹²⁷ Another scholar, Kucukcan, states that 369,839 ethnic-

¹²⁵ MeltemTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu," 12:28.

¹²⁶ "Zorlama Göç Devam/Forced Migration Continuation," *Milliyet*, May 30, 1989, 3, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹²⁷ Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," 142.

Turks left Bulgaria for Turkey in 1989.¹²⁸ Sadal indicates that between 1944 -1990, 637,219 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria.¹²⁹ Overall, approximately 1.5 to 2 million ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria since 1878.¹³⁰ As a result, although the documented numbers of emigrated-Turks were recorded differently in each of these sources, it can be said that over 300,000 ethnic-Turks left Bulgaria in 1989 to settle in Turkey in the short period between June 1989 and August 1989.

At the time, the 1989 exodus in the Balkans had been the most significant population movement to transpire since World War II.¹³¹ At times, the line of cars and trucks, loaded with stoves, domestic animals, and other items, stretched for more than 20 kilometres from behind the Bulgaria/Turkish border (**See Images 14, 15, and 16**).¹³²



Image 14: Some ethnic-Turks were unable to acquire vehicles to transport their belongings. Therefore, they used hand-pushed vehicles to immigrate to Turkey.

Source: Ali Osman Gündüz, "Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Türk Göçü/Migration of Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey (1989 Örneği/Example)," *Kırklareli Üniversitesi Balkan Araştırmaları Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi*, (2013): 7.

¹²⁸ Küçükcan, "Re-claiming identity," 57.

¹²⁹ Vahit Sadal, "Komünizm Sonrası Dönemde Bulgaristan'daki Türk Azınlık ve Siyasete Katılımları/The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria and Their Participation in Politics in the Post-Communist Period (1997-2000)" (PhD diss., Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü/Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Institute of Social Sciences, 2019), 109.

¹³⁰ Eminov, "Turks and Tatars in Bulgaria and the Balkans," 138.

¹³¹ Koksall and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 122.

¹³² Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish emigration and return," 347.



Image 15: Ethnic-Turks kiss the ground after they arrived in Turkey from Bulgaria in 1989.
Source: Ibid.



Image 16: Ethnic-Turks crossing the border the Turkish border.
Source: Ibid., 8.

Among the many repercussions of the 1989 exodus to Turkey from Bulgaria were the resulting impacts that took a toll on the Bulgarian government's international prestige, and reputation, as well as the nation's financial stability. In terms of the economy, as ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria mainly lived-in rural areas and villages, they mostly controlled the labour in the agricultural sector. The Bulgarian economy nearly came to a halt after the mass migration. It is worth noting here that the ethnic-Turks that emigrated were mainly between the ages of 16 to 65-years-old, which constituted the agrarian working

group of Bulgaria (Table 4). The Bulgarian government, declaring that there was a serious labour shortage, sought to encourage and mobilize potential foreign workers to come to Bulgaria in order to solve the shortage. Such mobilization tactics produced a new agrarian labour force, largely from Vietnam and Moldova.¹³³

Table 4: Demographic Structure of the 1989 Emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey (September 25, 1989)						
Age Groups	Female Immigration	Rate %	Male Immigration	Rate %	Total Immigration	Rate %
0-15	41,826	26.7	43,433	28.7	85,259	27.7
16-65	103,383	65.9	98,134	64.9	201,517	65.4
66+	11,620	7.4	9,739	6.4	21,359	6.9
Total	156,829	100	151,306	100	308,135	100

Source: Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı, and Sosyal Planlama Başkanlığı/State and Social Planning Organizations Presidency. "Bulgaristan'dan Türk Göçleri/Migrations of ethnic-Turks from Bulgaria," *DPT Sosyal Planlama Başkanlığı Hizmete Özel Rapor, Ankara (1990), 27*, quoted in Çetin, "BULGARİSTAN'DAN TÜRKİYE'YE SON TÜRK GÖÇÜNÜN (1989) SOSYO-EKONOMİK ETKİLERİ/THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES OF THE LAST TURKISH MIGRATION (1989) FROM BULGARIA TO TURKEY," 254.

The execution of the Bulgarization Project against ethnic-Turks, with its blatantly prejudicial apparent, severely impacted the Bulgarian government's prestige and reputation at the international level. For example, during the implementation of the Bulgarization Project, 2,500 ethnic-Turks were murdered for refusing to comply with the assimilation policies.¹³⁴ In another startling example, on May 21, 1989, Bulgarian police officers intruded on a Turkish wedding and arrested several Turkish guests. When the Turkish wedding attendees confronted the officers on the "grounds" of the arrests, the officers panicked and began firing uncontrollably at the wedding crowd. Twenty-four

¹³³ Gündüz, "Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Türk Göçü/Migration of Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey (1989 Örneği/Example)," 9.

¹³⁴ Akin, "Etnik Partiden Ulusal Partiye Bulgaristan'da Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi/From Ethnic Party to National Party Movement of Rights and Freedoms in Bulgaria," 69.

ethnic-Turks were injured, and three died before they reached the hospital.¹³⁵ This disaster became known as the “Bloody Wedding.” The enforcement of the assimilation practices against ethnic-Turks, and the murdering of those who refused to obey discriminatory policies, severely influenced Bulgaria’s prestige as the nation drastically fell out of favour worldwide.

After the 1989 exodus, Zhivkov’s reputation, and that of the Bulgarian government itself, collapsed, leaving behind both administrative and economic chaos. In late 1989, the communist regime itself disintegrated, allowing for the healing process to begin.

3.3.3.1 Healing Process

As previously examined, the 1989 exodus from Bulgaria to Turkey aided in bringing the communist regime to an end in Bulgaria. Conclusively, on November 10th, 1989, the Bulgarian communist regime faced a coup.¹³⁶ General Dobri Dzhrov (Minister of Defense), Georgi Antanasov (the Premier), Andrei Lukanoc (the Minister for Economic Relations), and Petar Mladenov (Foreign Minister) lead the coup.¹³⁷ After a thirty-five-year dictatorship, the supreme figure of the general secretary and head of the state, Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov, was ousted.¹³⁸ Foreign Minister Petar Mladenov replaced Zhivkov and served as President of Bulgaria until 1990.

Since the collapse of the communist party in Bulgaria in late 1989, several declarations and acknowledgments have been made towards attempting to renew and heal the relationship between the Bulgarian government and Bulgaria’s remaining ethnic-

¹³⁵ Atasoy and Soykan, "Freedom walk of the Turks in Bulgaria," 118.

¹³⁶ Köksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 123.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 124.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 123.

Turkish community.¹³⁹ Firstly, under Petar Mladenov, the government took responsibility for its actions and admitted to its prior implementation of the devastating assimilation procedures. Secondly, ethnic-Turks were allowed to reclaim their names. This can be understood as follows:

Calling it a grave political error, the government declared that henceforth the cultural and civil rights of all citizens would be guaranteed and protected. More specifically, Turkish and other Muslims would be allowed to reclaim their Turkish-Muslim names; they would be allowed to practice their religion without any government interference; Turks would be free to speak Turkish and Turkish-language instruction would be reintroduced in municipal schools in ethnically mixed areas.¹⁴⁰

This acknowledgment stands as a milestone in the reconciliation process of the relationship with ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. Also, the declaration is the first document that officially recognized the offences that were committed against ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria.¹⁴¹ Although Mladenov took decisive and positive actions on behalf of ethnic-Turks, his newly formed government collapsed in less than a year after it rose to power, a victim to the repercussions indented from the previous communist regime. In 2002, Bulgarian Vice-President Angel Marin recalled what happened to the minority groups under the communist regime in Bulgaria. He demonstrated the scope of the improvements in Bulgaria, further stating that “I [Marin] would like to ask your forgiveness for the injustices done to you in my country, and I feel embarrassed that such oppression took place in my country.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ The newly formed Bulgarian government promised to re-establish the policies and legislation to be inclusive and non-discriminatory for the ethnic-Turks. Source: Eminov, "Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," 229.

¹⁴⁰ Ali Eminov, *Turkish and other Muslim minorities in Bulgaria* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 138.

¹⁴¹ Köksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 125.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 136.

A decade later, another apology came from the former Prime Minister, Ivan Kostov, and was supported by 112 parliamentarians of the Bulgarian National Grand Assembly. On February 9th, 2012, Kostov's admission received an endorsement from the Bulgarian Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Religious Freedom.¹⁴³ The declaration is as follows:

The expulsion of over 360,000 Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin in 1989 is a form of ethnic cleansing committed by a totalitarian regime. The parliament calls on Bulgarian Justice and Chief Prosecutor to do everything necessary to complete the case against the perpetrators of the so-called Revival Process. Attempts to cover it up with a prescription transfers the blame from the specific culprits to the entire Bulgarian nation.¹⁴⁴

This declaration is critical as it further announces official recognition of the Bulgarization Project. These declarations exemplify the efforts that were made towards the healing process since the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria. Koksal and Gul note that "Bulgaria is shown as a success story in the peaceful transition from a totalitarian regime."¹⁴⁵ The country finally addressed its brutal treatment of ethnic-Turks.

Since the collapse of the communist regime in late 1989, although the newly formed Bulgarian government declared responsibility for the Bulgarization Project and took constructive steps towards correcting it, emigration from Bulgaria to Turkey did not cease. Between 1991 and 1994, 120,000 ethnic-Turks immigrated to Turkey from

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Sofia News Agency, <http://www.novinite.com/newsletter/print.php?id=135623>, <http://www.novinite.com/newsletter/print.php?id=113074>, quoted in Köksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 136.

¹⁴⁵ Köksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 137.

Bulgaria.¹⁴⁶ With Bulgaria's entry into the European Union (EU) in 2007, the largest immigration routes changed from Turkey to Western-European countries.

¹⁴⁶ Levent Kayapınar, "Atatürk, Menderes ve Özal dönemi Bulgaristan'dan Gelen Göçmenler Üzerine Gözlemler/Observations on the Immigrants from Bulgaria during the Atatürk, Menderes and Ozal periods," in *89 Göçü. Bulgaristan'da 1984-89 Azınlık Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Zorunlu Göç/in 89 Immigration. Bulgaria and Turkey in 1984-89 Minority Politics and Forced Migration*, edited by Neriman Ersoy Hacısalihoğlu and Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu (İstanbul: Yıldız Technical University Center for Balkan and Black Sea Studies & The Balkans Civilization Centre, 2012), 389.

Chapter Four

Naim Suleymanoglu in the Olympics

4.1 Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games

In May of 1988, Bulgaria and Turkey arrived at an agreement on the subject of Suleymanoglu's weightlifting "license," qualifying him to compete for Turkey at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. Less than a month before the 1988 Seoul Games, a dysentery outbreak befell the weightlifting training camp of the Turkish national weightlifting team. Suleymanoglu and many of his teammates were exposed to the outbreak.¹ Out of special consideration for Suleymanoglu and his teammates, Prime Minister Ozal arranged for them to receive treatment at the Ankara Gülhane Military Medical Academy (Turkish, *Gulhane Askeri Tip Akademisi*, GATA). It is worth noting here that the GATA, a military-based hospital, barred civilians from undergoing treatment there unless in cases of extreme emergency. Under a doctor's supervision, Suleymanoglu continued an active training program. Suleymanoglu neared top form, ready to compete in the 60 kg. weight-class for Turkey at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.

The 1988 Seoul Games opened on September 17th, and the following day, the weightlifting competitions began.² In the snatch discipline, Suleymanoglu had to face his former Bulgarian teammate and closest rival, Stephan Topurov. During the first attempts in the snatch, Topurov lifted 137.5 kg.; Suleymanoglu lifted 145 kg. In the second and third attempts, Topurov failed to lift 142.5 kg. Suleymanoglu lifted 150 kg. in the second

¹ "Halter Kampinda Dizanteri Salginda/Dysentery Outbreak in the Weightlifting Camp," *Milliyet*, August 3, 1988, 14, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

² *Games of the 24th Olympiad, Seoul 1988: the Abridged Official Report* (Seoul, Korea: Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee, 1989), 42.

attempt and 152.5 kg. in his third attempt. In the end, Suleymanoglu succeeded with a 15 kg. advantage against Topurov. In the clean & jerk discipline, the first attempt resulted in Topurov lifting 165 kg.; Suleymanoglu lifted 175 kg. For the second attempt, Topurov lifted 175 kg, while Suleymanoglu lifted 188.5 kg. After Suleymanoglu's successful lift, Topurov, discouraged, forfeited his third attempt and bowed out from the competition.³

Although Suleymanoglu was guaranteed the gold medal, the rules indicated that he had one more lift attempt.⁴ He requested for 190 kg., which he lifted successfully. The entire stadium erupted in applause for his sensational performance. In that 190 kg. lift, Suleymanoglu hoisted more than three times his body weight (**See Image 17**). The journalist Bayindir explained how Suleymanoglu's demeanour was focused that day. Bayindir felt as though Suleymanoglu was someone else, a superpower.⁵ Another observation was fashioned by the USA Weightlifting Federation's executive director, Harvey Newton, who stated that "Suleymanoglu is so short, and his arms and legs are such a short size that he does not use the traditional technique. He is able to snap that bar up very quickly. He is almost always successful, and he makes it look easy."⁶ In the final medal rankings, Suleymanoglu won the gold medal, lifting 152.5 kg. in the snatch and 190 kg. in the clean & jerk, for a grand total of 342.5 kg.⁷ Suleymanoglu's total surpassed

³ Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*, 252.

⁴ In the World and European Weightlifting Championships, weightlifters compete in three individual categories: in the snatch, in the clean & jerk, and total. In the Olympic Games, a weightlifter's rank is based on a total of their best in the snatch and the clean & jerk lifts.

⁵ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," 50:21.

⁶ "Weightlifter sets three world-records," *Detroit Free Press*, September 21, 1988, 61, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁷ According to scholar Glenn Ledder, after considering the Sinclair Coefficients Formula, Suleymanoglu's performance at the 1988 Seoul Games was the best performance in weightlifting when his book was published. For more information, please see the following source: Glenn Ledder, *Mathematics for the life sciences: calculus, modeling, probability, and dynamical systems* (Berlin: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 16.

the total of Joachim Kunz of East Germany, the Olympic champion in the next higher category (67.5 kg. weight-class), who lifted a total of 340 kg.⁸ Notably, at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu set six world records and nine Olympic records.⁹

At a press conference following the closure of the Games, a journalist asked Suleymanoglu how he remained focused and motivated. Suleymanoglu responded by stating that in part, he drew his inspiration from citizens of Turkey and ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria.¹⁰ Suleymanoglu dedicated his success at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games to his family, whom he had not seen since 1986 when he defected.¹¹

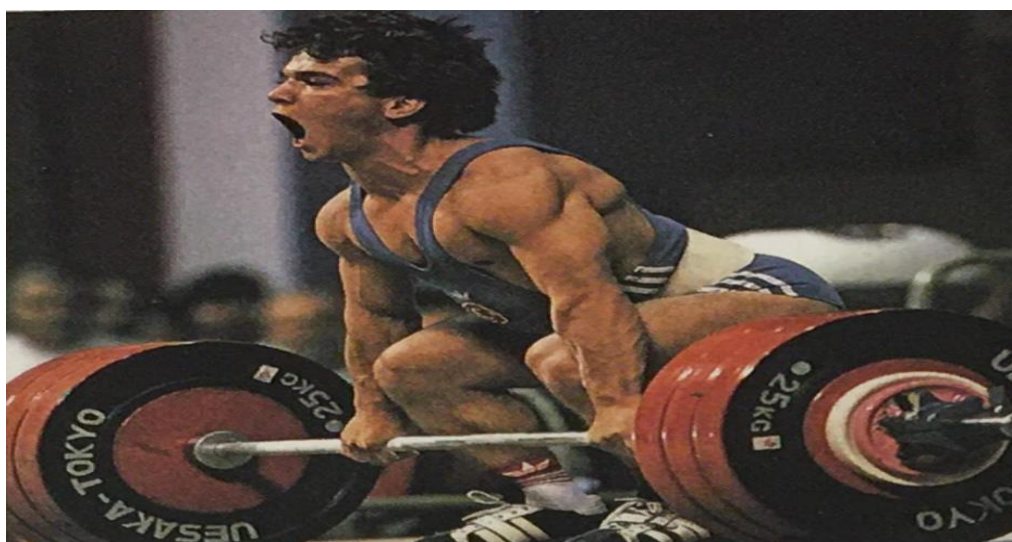


Image 17: Naim Suleymanoglu lifting 190 kg. and where he set the world record in the clean & jerk at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.

Source: Mallon, "Obituaries," 72.

⁸ "Strong as an Ox!," The International Olympic Committee (IOC), last modified May 23, 2017, <https://www.olympic.org/news/strong-as-an-ox>.

⁹ Tracy Dodds, "You Name It, He Lifts It," *The Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1988, 31, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Note: Suleymanoglu's Olympic and world records in Seoul are as follows: In the snatch; 145 kg. (Olympic record), 150.5 kg. (Olympic and world records) and 152.5 kg. (Olympic and world records). In the clean & jerk; 175 kg. (Olympic record), 188.5 kg. (Olympic and world records), and 190 kg. (Olympic and world records). In total; 320 kg. (Olympic record), 339 kg. (Olympic and world records), and 342.5 kg. (Olympic and world records).

¹⁰ TRTSPOR, "Kapikule'nin Anahtari/The Key of Kapikule," 50:30.

¹¹ "Substitute lifter takes gold, sets 3 records," *The Vancouver Sun*, December 22, 1988, 67, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Suleymanoglu's gold medal win was a milestone for Turkey because it was the first Olympic gold medal for the nation other than the medals won in wrestling. And, it was the first Olympic gold medal that Turkey had won in 20 years in any sport category.¹² Following Suleymanoglu's return home, subsequently, Turkish Prime Minister Ozal telephoned Suleymanoglu to congratulate him on his success. Then, too, Ozal sent his private jet to bring him to the capital city, Ankara, where Ozal welcomed him.¹³ Upon returning home, Suleymanoglu was applauded and greeted by thousands of Turks (See **Images 18 and 19**). The Turkish media highlighted Suleymanoglu's success, describing Naim as "the eighth wonder of the world,"¹⁴ *Bulgarian TV* announced: "Our famous lifter –Naim who competed for Turkey became Olympic champion by breaking six world records."¹⁵ During one of his interviews at the 1988 Seoul Games, the USA's famous track and field athlete, Carl Lewis, congratulated Suleymanoglu on his success.¹⁶ Notably, Suleymanoglu was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine after the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (See **Image 20**).

In rapid order, Suleymanoglu was bestowed with various gifts from individuals, associations, and from Prime Minister Ozal himself. For instance, İş Bank (a commercial bank in Turkey) gave 342.5 kg. of gold coins to Suleymanoglu, matching the total of 342.5 kg. that he lifted at the Games.¹⁷ Suleymanoglu was given two apartments in

¹² Dodds, "You Name It, He Lifts It," 31.

¹³ Len Johnson, "Weightlifter back where he belongs," *The Age*, November 10, 1993, 34, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹⁴ Ihsan Topaloglu, "Naim is the eighth wonder of the world," *Milliyet*, September 21, 1988, 16, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹⁵ Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 64.

¹⁶ "Lewis: Naim Sahane, Inanamadim/Lewis: Naim is Great, I Could Not Believe It," *Milliyet*, September 22, 1988, 13, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹⁷ "Naim's Bir Sandik Altin/A Full Box of Gold for Naim," *Milliyet*, October 14, 1988, 16, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

Istanbul. Prime Minister Ozal also gave Suleymanoglu a gift that he had never expected to receive; it was an announcement that Suleymanoglu's family would immigrate to Turkey as soon as Turkish officials finalized the matter with Bulgaria's leader, Todor Zhivkov.¹⁸ In October of 1988, indeed, Suleymanoglu's family landed in Istanbul, greeted by personally Ozal and his wife, Semra (See **Image 21**).



Image 18: Suleymanoglu on the white bus, was greeted by a vast crowd in Istanbul after winning the gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (A national parade for Suleymanoglu).

Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 20.

¹⁸ Nilufer Yalcin, "Ankara, Naim icin atakda/Ankara is in touch for Naim," *Milliyet*, September 23, 1988, 14, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.



Image 19: A vast crowd applauded Suleymanoglu on the Olympic bus.
Source: Ibid., 21.

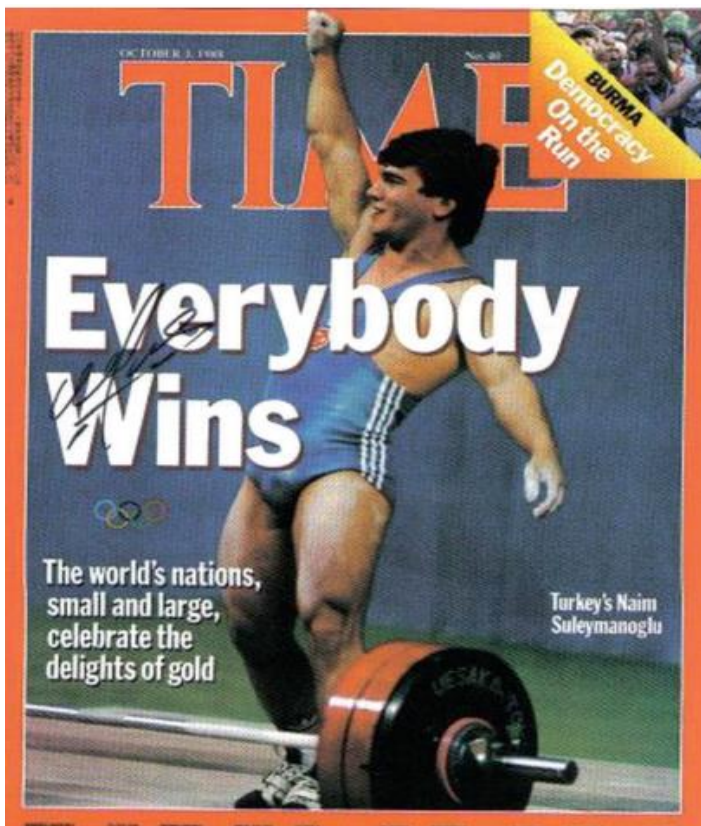


Image 20: Suleymanoglu was on the cover of *Time* magazine after winning the gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games.
Source: Ibid., 25.



Image 21: Suleymanoglu's family immigrated to Turkey from Bulgaria with assistance from Prime Minister Turgut Ozal. Back row, left to right: Naim Suleymanoglu's father, Suleyman Suleymanoglu (Black Circle), the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal (Green Circle), Naim Suleymanoglu (Blue Circle), Turgut Ozal's wife, Semra Ozal (Red Circle), Naim Suleymanoglu's mother, Hatice Suleymanoglu (White Circle), Naim Suleymanoglu's youngest brother, Muharrem Suleymanoglu (Grey Circle), and Naim Suleymanoglu's big brother, Rahim Suleymanoglu (Pink Circle)

Source: *Ibid.*, 23.

4.2 Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1992 Barcelona Summer Olympic Games

As highlighted in Chapter 3, Suleymanoglu's "Olympic effort" helped to sensitize the global repercussions regarding the assimilation campaign against ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria. The campaign caught the attention of several international human rights organizations that began to monitor and investigate the accusations made against the Bulgarian government. Furthermore, as Suleymanoglu was raised to become a role model for ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria, several ethnic-Turkish athletes residing in communist-dominated countries immigrated to Turkey.¹⁹ By 1989, Turkey stood as a golden gate for

¹⁹ Muharrem Suleymanoglu (Naim Suleymanoglu's brother), Nazif Suleymanoglu (not related to Naim Suleymanoglu), Halil Mutlu, Erdinc Aslan, Sunay Bulut, Ali Kayali, and Fedail Guler defected to Turkey from Soviet allied countries such as Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and Bulgaria as a result of Suleymanoglu's inspiration. Among athletes, Enver Turkileri, one of Suleymanoglu's weightlifting coaches in Bulgaria, also immigrated to Turkey to work with the Turkish national weightlifting team (1989-2004). Source: Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 69.

ethnic-Turk athletes who wished to compete for Turkey at international and national sport events. Much of this phenomenon was due to Naim Suleymanoglu's efforts.

While Suleymanoglu was preparing for the 1989 Athens European Weightlifting Championships, he injured his lower back. However, under Dr. Savas Agaoglu's supervision, Suleymanoglu's injury healed significantly, enough for him to compete for and win the gold medal at the 1989 European Championships.²⁰ It was a costly victory. Upon returning home, Suleymanoglu was diagnosed with a cracked vertebra in his lower back. Dr. Agaoglu warned Suleymanoglu that if he continued his training programs, he would risk sustaining permanent paralysis.²¹ Subsequently, Suleymanoglu declared his retirement from weightlifting in August of 1990 (**See Image 22**).²² This unexpected development came as a surprise to the weightlifting community. The President of the IOC, Juan Antonio Samaranch, declared his sadness for Suleymanoglu's injury and "forced" retirement.²³ Questioning the severity of the diagnosis of Suleymanoglu's lower back condition, President Ozal sent Suleymanoglu to the USA for further evaluation and treatment.²⁴ In addition, Suleymanoglu, in a limited fashion, embarked on a recovery program under Dr. Agaoglu's supervision.²⁵

²⁰ Suleymanoglu's lifts as follows: 145 kg. in the snatch, 172.5 kg. in the clean & jerk and 317.5 kg. in total. Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Hekulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 33.

²¹ Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 69.

²² "Naim Halteri Birakti/Naim Ended His Weightlifting Career," *Milliyet*, August 14, 1990, 18.

Note: Suleymanoglu's first retirement occurred after the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games due to his lower back pain. The second retirement occurred after the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. Suleymanoglu's last and final retirement took place after the 2000 Sidney Olympic Games.

²³ "Samarach'ta Naim Uzuntusu/Samarach's Sadness for Naim," *Milliyet*, November 12, 1990, 22, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

²⁴ In 1989, Turgut Ozal became the President of Turkey after a successful political campaign.

²⁵ The outcome of the second opinion in the USA was positive for Suleymanoglu's lower back injury. Upon returning home, Suleymanoglu continued his treatment under the supervision of Dr. Agaoglu until the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.



Image 22: Suleymanoglu is declaring his retirement from his weightlifting career due to his lower back injury.

Source: "Naim Halteri Birakti/Naim Ended His Weightlifting Career," *Milliyet*, August 14, 1990, 18, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

The Photo is by Munir Bagriacik

As Suleymanoglu recovered from his lower back injury, he aimed to compete at the 1991 World Weightlifting Championships in Donaueschingen, Germany, an event at which he eventually attended. He ended up winning the gold medal by lifting 137.5 kg. in the snatch and 172.5 kg. in the clean & jerk, for a 310 kg. total.²⁶ Although Suleymanoglu did not attempt any world records, he proved that he had almost fully recovered and was ready for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games in Spain. Notably, in order to ensure a full recovery, Suleymanoglu refrained from competing at the 1991 European Weightlifting Championships in Władysławowo, Poland.

On July 25, 1992, the Games of the XXV Olympiad were held in Barcelona, Spain.²⁷ The 60 kg. weight-class competitions in weightlifting began on July 28, 1992. In

²⁶ Bayindir, *The Pocket Hercules*, 88.

²⁷ Wayne Coffey, "Sized Party: Revelry reigns in Spain at opening ceremonies," *New York Daily News*, July 26, 1992, 37, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Suleymanoglu's first attempt, he lifted 142.5 kg. in the snatch yet failed in his second and third attempts at a higher weight. At these Games, Suleymanoglu's closest rival, Nikolay Peshalov of Bulgaria, lifted 137.5 kg. in the snatch. In the clean & jerk, Suleymanoglu lifted 170 kg. in his first attempt and 177.5 kg. in his second. He did not take his third attempt. Peshalov's best clean & jerk lift was 167.5 kg. Naim Suleymanoglu was to become the gold medalist by lifting a total of 320 kg., which was his second consecutive Olympic gold medal.²⁸

4.3 Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games

With respect to Suleymanoglu's weightlifting rivals, Valerios Leonidis of Greece was easily his most prominent opponent over time. Thus, it is worth analyzing how this rivalry between Suleymanoglu and Leonidis developed. Valerios Leonidis was born in Yessentuki, Soviet Union, in 1966. His family, of Pontic-origin, lived traditionally on the Eastern shores of the Black Sea.²⁹ Leonidis defected to Greece from the U.S.S.R. in 1991.³⁰ As fate would have it, Leonidis and Suleymanoglu faced each other on various weightlifting platforms.

The rivalry began at the 1993 World Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, Australia, where Suleymanoglu won the gold medal in the 64 kg. weight-class. In Melbourne, there was a 10 kg. difference between Suleymanoglu's and Leonidis's lift totals. In 1994, at the European Weightlifting Championships in Sokolov, Czech Republic, in the 64 kg. weight-class, Suleymanoglu won the gold medal over Leonidis by

²⁸ "XXV Summer Olympics: Weightlifting," *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, July 29, 1992, 24, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁹ Bayindir, *The Pocket Hercules*, 153.

³⁰ David Wallechinsky, "Olympic Films 1988-1996: New Political Realities, New Cinematic Styles," *Journal of Olympic History*, 28, no. 1 (2020): 34.

a 7.5 kg. difference in their total lift amounts. That same year, the World Weightlifting Championships was held in Istanbul, Turkey. Suleymanoglu once again won the gold medal over Leonidis; however, the difference in their results was only 5 kg. in total. After the tournament, the Turkish media gave Suleymanoglu the name of "Suleyman the Magnificent."³¹ A cascade of gifts was given to Suleymanoglu: a house, 210 gold coins, a car, and \$10,000 U.S. dollars.³²

Leonidis and Suleymanoglu next competed in Warsaw, Poland, at the 1995 European Weightlifting Championships. Once again, Suleymanoglu won the gold medal over Leonidis; however, the difference in total weight lifted was only 2.5 kg. The World Weightlifting Championships was also held that same year in Guangzhou, China, where the spectators witnessed an astonishing match. Although both weightlifters lifted a total of 327.5 kg, Suleymanoglu won the gold medal because his body weight was 200 grams lighter than that of Leonidis.³³ There remained "no doubt," Leonidis had gained parity with his Turkish rival (**See Table 5**).³⁴ Notably, Leonidis won the 1996 European Weightlifting Championships in Stavanger, Norway, a championship in which Suleymanoglu did not compete.³⁵

³¹ "Muthesem Suleyman/Suleyman the Magnificent," *Milliyet*, January 2, 1995, 30, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

Note: Suleyman the Magnificent or Suleyman I, who was the sultan of the Ottoman Empire between 1520-1566. Under Suleyman I rule, the Ottoman Empire lived its "golden age."

³² "Herkul'e Servet/A Fortune to Hercules," *Milliyet*, November 21, 1994, 30, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

³³ Wallechinsky, "Olympic Films 1988-1996," 34.

³⁴ Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 83.

³⁵ Suleymanoglu was disqualified from participating in the 1996 European Weightlifting Championships as he weighed more than was allowed for his particular weight-class.

Table 5:³⁶ A Comparison of Naim Suleymanoglu's and Valerios Leonidis's Performance in the 64 kg. weight-class

Name of the Tournament	Suleymanoglu's Performance in the Snatch	Suleymanoglu's Performance in the Clean & Jerk	Suleymanoglu's Performance in Total	Leonidis's Performance in the Snatch	Leonidis's Performance in the Clean & Jerk	Leonidis's Performance in Total
1993 World Weightlifting Championships (Melbourne, Australia)	145 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	177.5 kg. (Gold Medal Winner & World Record)	322.5 kg. (Gold Medal Winner & World Record)	137.5 kg. (not in top three)	175 kg. (Silver medalist)	312.5 kg. (not in top three)
1994 European Weightlifting Championships (Sokolov, Czech Republic)	145 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	180 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	325 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	140 kg. (not in top three)	177.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	317.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)
1994 World Weightlifting Championships (Istanbul, Turkey)	147.5 kg. (World Record & Gold Medal Winner)	182.5 kg. (World Record & Gold Medal Winner)	330 kg. (World Record & Gold Medal Winner)	146.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	180.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	325 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)
1995 European Weightlifting Championships (Warsaw, Poland)	142.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	182.5 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	325 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	140 kg. (Bronze Medal Winner)	182.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	322.5 kg. (Silver Gold Winner)
1995 World Weightlifting Championships (Guangzhou, China)	147.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	180 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	327.5 kg. (Gold Medal Winner)	148 kg. (World Record & Gold Medal Winner)	180 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)	327.5 kg. (Silver Medal Winner)

In September 1990, the IOC awarded the hosting of the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, also known as the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games, to Atlanta, Georgia, USA.³⁷ The Atlanta Olympic Games opened on July 19, 1996. Turkey and Greece have faced each other multiple times throughout history, but this time it was not for militarized

³⁶ Table 5 includes information that has been compiled from the following sources: Tayfun Bayindir, *The Pocket Hercules*; Enver Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*; Tamer Taspinar, *Naim the Pocket Hercules*; Tufan Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*; The National Olympic Committee of Turkey (official website); International and Turkish Weightlifting Federations (official websites); *Sport Illustrated Vault*; *Milliyet*; *Hurriyet*; *The New York Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *South Florida Sun Sentinel*; *The Sacramento Bee*. These sources can be found in the Bibliography.

³⁷ Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, & Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 250.

conflict nor political reasons. This time, the two rivals met at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, where two-time Turkish Olympic gold medalist, Naim Suleymanoglu, would face his friend and closest competitive rival, Valerios Leonidis of Greece.

The weightlifting contest at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games began on July 22, 1996. The IOC President Samaranch sat in the front row as spectators. The stadium stood divided between the Greek supporters and Turkish zealots. Not only was the tension at its peak due to the ongoing political disputes between Turkey and Greece, but there were also the elements of the Olympic spectacle that spread throughout the stadium, encouraging the spectators to cheer in frenzied fashion for their favourite.³⁸ Leonidis and Suleymanoglu led the weightlifting competition at the 1996 Games from the start.

According to one of the documented reports from the competition:

The snatch saw both men lift 145 kg., but only Süleymanoğlu succeeded at 147.5 kg., meaning that he led by 2.5 kg. at the halfway mark. However, the real drama was still to come. In the clean & jerk, both men opened with lifts of 180 kg. The world record stood at 183 kg., but Süleymanoğlu decided to go straight for 185 kg. The crowd fell silent – and he held the weight, broke the record, and opened up a significant lead.³⁹

Upon each occasion when these weightlifters, Suleymanoglu and Leonidis, mounted the lifting stage to try their next lift, the crowd would erupt with cheers and applause. The age-old political conflict between the Turks and the Greeks only enhanced the atmosphere. It also increased the pressure on both weightlifters. The documented report from the competition continued:

³⁸ My master's thesis supervisor, Dr. Robert K. Barney was present at these proceedings, claiming that this was the most exciting event (with the exception of the Ben Johnson 100 metres sprint in Seoul in 1988) that he ever witnessed in his attendance at nine Summer Olympic Games between 1996 and 2016.

³⁹ "Weightlifter Süleymanoğlu Raises the Bar to New Heights," The International Olympic Committee (IOC), last modified July 22, 1996, <https://www.olympic.org/news/weightlifter-suleymanoglu-raises-the-bar-to-new-heights>).

Remarkably, though, Leonidis countered with an audacious attempt at 187.5 kg., and he duly stunned the crowd and, indeed, the watching world by lifting it above his head to set another new world record. Süleymanoğlu had no choice but to attempt to match that, which he did, equaling the record and regaining the overall lead. The final lift would now see Leonidis try to lift 190 kg. to take gold. He got the bar to his chest but couldn't power it any further and had to settle for silver.⁴⁰

Suleymanoglu won the gold medal, which made him the first weightlifter to win three consecutive Olympic gold medals.⁴¹ Despite the political disputes between Turkey and Greece, both Leonidis and Suleymanoglu embraced the fundamental spirit of the Olympics. Later, both Leonidis and Suleymanoglu received Turkey's Abdi Ipekci Friendship and Peace Award.⁴² After the competition, they became good friends. Both helped to develop the sport of weightlifting in their respective countries (**See Image 23**).



Image 23: Suleymanoglu and Leonidis at the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) meeting in Athens, Greece in 2001.

Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 44.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michael Bamberger, "A POCKET FULL OF POWER IN A HERCULEAN PERFORMANCE, NAIM SULEYMANOĞLU OF TURKEY MADE OLYMPIC WEIGHTLIFTING HISTORY," *Sports Illustrated Vault*, July 23, 1996, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1996/07/23/a-pocket-full-of-power-in-a-herculean-performance-naim-suleymanoglu-of-turkey-made-olympic-weightlifting-history>.

⁴² Ibid. Note: The Abdi Ipekci Friendship and Peace Award is one of the most prestigious distinctions in the sports community in Turkey.

In sum, Leonidis and Suleymanoglu pushed each other to their extreme physical limits throughout their many competitions together. Although Suleymanoglu won the gold medal in the end, Leonidis's performance was undeniable. Winning the gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Games was particularly noteworthy for Suleymanoglu's career because he became the first weightlifter to win three consecutive gold medals at the Olympics. After returning home, Suleymanoglu reflected that he was at peace after winning three gold medals, stating that he hoped that he had paid his great debt to his nation.⁴³

During the growing rise of Suleymanoglu's world-wide popularity, Suleymanoglu collected three Olympic Games medals. As highlighted above, each of Suleymanoglu's Olympic Games holds a unique story. For instance, Suleymanoglu used the 1988 Seoul Games to disclose Bulgaria's assimilation campaign during the era of the communist Bulgarian government, which resulted in his extraordinary sporting performances and allowed him to achieve his ultimate purpose. Secondly, Suleymanoglu won his second Olympic gold medal at the 1992 Barcelona Games. Thirdly, after the epic battle between Valerios Leonidis and Naim Suleymanoglu at the 1996 Atlanta Games, Suleymanoglu became the first weightlifter to win three gold medals at the Olympics consecutively.

⁴³ Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*, 95.

Chapter 5

A Less Than Glorious Ending

In general terms, Suleymanoglu's gold medal-winning performances in the Olympic Games of 1988 in Seoul, 1992 in Barcelona, and 1996 in Atlanta made weightlifting immensely popular in Turkey. Ultimately, the Turkish presence in weightlifting became a worldwide brand. On the other hand, however, Suleymanoglu's growing desire to be a politician, and the pressure that was placed on him by the Turkish media and Turkish officials, prepared him for the inevitable end. This Chapter examines Suleymanoglu 's performance in Sydney and his post-retirement journey until his death in 2017.

5.1 Naim Suleymanoglu at the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games

After winning the gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Games, Suleymanoglu announced his "second retirement" in 1997.¹ The retirement was brief. Due to pressure placed on him by the media in Turkey, as well as that from Turkish officials, Suleymanoglu decided to return to weightlifting to compete at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.² To prepare for Sydney, Suleymanoglu competed at the 2000 European Weightlifting Championships in Sofia, Bulgaria.³ The result was disappointing.

¹ Robert Millward, "Two giants of sport to compete no more: Cyclist Indurain, lifter 'Pocket Hercules' retire," *The Sacramento Bee*, January 3, 1997, E3, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Note: After the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu announced his second retirement. He attempted to engage in Turkish politics; however, he was unsuccessful.

² It is worth reminding here that due to the Soviet Union's boycott of the USA, Suleymanoglu was unable to perform at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. If Suleymanoglu had participated in the LA Games, the 2000 Sydney Games potentially would have been his fifth Olympic Games.

³ The IWF changed its regulations in 2000. New policies dictated that to be eligible to compete in the Olympics, weightlifters had to participate in an international tournament. In addition to that, weightlifting categories changed as well. Thus, Suleymanoglu had to switch his division from 64 kg. to 62 kg. Source: Bayindir, *The Pocket Hercules*, 168.

Suleymanoglu secured a bronze medal in the 62 kg. weight-class, realizing that he only had a minimal amount of time to prepare.⁴

Although Suleymanoglu was now 33-years-old and placed third at the 2000 European Weightlifting Championships, various Turkish and global media channels highlighted Suleymanoglu as the favourite to win the gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.⁵ Suleymanoglu stated: "silver or bronze is nothing for me. I am only satisfied with the gold."⁶ Although Suleymanoglu's desired to maintain his title, he knew he was embarking on a risky endeavour. He had not trained assiduously for three years.⁷ In order to compete in the 62 kg. weight-class in Sydney, Suleymanoglu had to lose 4 kg. of weight in a short amount of time.⁸ Losing a considerable amount of weight could potentially affect his performance. Though Suleymanoglu was an experienced weightlifter, one of the most iconic weightlifting figures in history, and a favourite to win the gold medal at the Sydney Olympic Games, he knew his lack of training compromised his chances at winning additional gold medals.⁹

On September 15th, 2000, the twenty-seventh Olympiad commenced in Sydney.¹⁰ The weightlifting discipline began on the second day. In Suleymanoglu's first attempt, where he could have potentially set a new Olympic record, he asked to lift 145 kg.;

⁴ "Pocket Hercules back for more," *Edmonton Journal*, September 16, 2000, 43, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵ Zerman Akarsu, "Sidney'in 2 yildizi/2 Favorites in Sydney," *Cumhuriyet*, September 13, 2000, 19, <https://www.cumhuriyetarsivi.com/>.

⁶ Owen Slot, "The weight of the world," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 15, 2000, 23, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁷ Suleymanoglu did not train for three years after he competed at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games.

⁸ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 23.

⁹ "Sozlugumde Korku Yok/There Is No Fear in My Life," *Milliyet*, September 9, 2000, 37, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

¹⁰ Barney, Wenn, and Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings*, 1.

however, he failed to lift this amount successfully. In his second and third attempts, Suleymanoglu failed again in the 145 kg. snatch, and he was automatically disqualified from the following clean & jerk round. Suleymanoglu was disappointed about his performance.¹¹ He descended from the platform while the commentators remarked: "Bye-bye, it's over."¹²

Upon returning home, the local media in Turkey criticized Suleymanoglu's performance, resulting in published headlines such as: "The End: Alcohol, Women and Nightlife."¹³ International media channels generated titles such as "Arrogance flattens Pocket Hercules,"¹⁴ and "Pocket Hercules gambles, loses medal."¹⁵ Suleymanoglu remained silent in response to the criticisms. Later, he was interviewed by the *Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT)*, where he explained his performance in Sydney, stating:

I was lifting 140 kg. backstage during the warm-up. However, I was not as motivated as I used to be, and I felt more pressure on me to compete this time. I felt that if I was unable to lift 145 kg. in the snatch, I did not want to finish my career like that; however, I am still proud of my career and the international success that I brought to Turkey.¹⁶

After the Sydney Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu announced his final retirement.

Although Suleymanoglu's performance in Sydney was disappointing, this failure didn't

¹¹ "Pocket Herc bombs," *Red Deer Advocate*, September 18, 2000, 20, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹² Alan Abrahamson, "Hercules Can't Pocket This One," *The Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2000, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-sep-18-ss-23059-story.html>.

¹³ "İcki, Kadın, Sigara ve İste Son/The End: Alcohol, Women, and Nightlife," *Hurriyet*, September 18, 2000, 1, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/>.

¹⁴ Ian O'Connor, "Arrogance flattens Pocket Hercules," *Asbury Park Press*, September 18, 2000, 55, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹⁵ Mark Kreidler, "Pocket Hercules gambles, loses medal," *The Sacramento Bee*, September 18, 2000, 11, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹⁶ MeltemTV, "Naim Suleymanoglu," 23:25.

stop him from becoming an Olympic icon. The achievement of winning three gold medals in four Olympic Games ensured such distinction.

5.2 Post-Retirement Journey

5.2.1 Promoting Weightlifting Sport Among Youth

After the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, Suleymanoglu retired from his competitive career, having spent 23 years weightlifting. Shortly after, Suleymanoglu was elected as vice-president of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) from 2000-2004, which made him the youngest vice-president in IWF history.¹⁷ During Suleymanoglu's vice presidency with the IWF, Suleymanoglu assisted in promoting weightlifting worldwide by meeting with national delegates, such as the 2003 World Weightlifting Championships in Vancouver, Canada.¹⁸ After Suleymanoglu's role at the IWF ended in 2004, he began working for the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF) in 2006 as a vice-president and team coordinator. He aimed to improve and develop weightlifting in Turkey so that Turkish athletes had improved chances of succeeding at international tournaments, notably at the Olympic Games.¹⁹ With Suleymanoglu's mentorship, many promising youth weightlifters were moulded in Turkey, among them Taner Sagir, Nezir Sagir,²⁰ and Nurcan Taylan.²¹ Notably, both Taner Sagir and Nurcan Taylan won gold medals in weightlifting at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

¹⁷ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 27.

¹⁸ Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules*, 182.

¹⁹ "Suleymanoglu'na yeni gorev/New Duty to Suleymanoglu," *Hurriyet*, July 22, 2006, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/suleymanoglu-na-yeni-gorev-4795670>.

²⁰ "Naim'in Prensleri/Naim's Princes," *Milliyet*, June 15, 2003, 30, <http://gazetearsivi.milliyet.com.tr>.

²¹ "Golden Opportunity: Nurcan Taylan," International Olympic Committee, last modified April 10, 2017, <https://www.olympic.org/news/golden-opportunity-nurcan-taylan>.

In 2012, Halil Mutlu, a retired Turkish Olympic weightlifter, and Naim Suleymanoglu announced their candidacy for joint presidency of the TWF; however, they were not elected.²² According to Mutlu, they lost the election due to the political bureaucracy in Turkey.²³ Later, as a result of health-related issues, Suleymanoglu stepped down from his administrative role in weightlifting. In sum, since Suleymanoglu's retirement in 2000 from his competitive weightlifting career, he began to assist in promoting weightlifting globally and locally in Turkey. During this process, many promising weightlifters were discovered.

5.2.2 Attempting to Live the Political Life

Suleymanoglu put his late weightlifting career aside because of his rising interest in becoming more involved with Turkish politics. His first attempt to become a parliamentarian took place in 1999 at Turkey's general elections. He became an independent candidate to represent Bursa at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey because many ethnic-Turks settled in Bursa after immigrating to Turkey from Bulgaria during the 1989 exodus. However, the result was not as Suleymanoglu had expected. He was not elected.

Suleymanoglu's second attempt to be a parliamentarian took place in 2004 in the Turkish local elections. This time, instead of running as an independent candidate, he joined the Nationalist Movement Party, hoping to be elected as the mayor of the Kıraç municipality, in the Büyükçekmece district, in Istanbul. According to Suleymanoglu, he had an eye-opening experience when he participated in the 1999 general elections in

²² Bayindir, *Cep Herkulu/The Pocket Hercules*, 183.

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

Turkey as an independent candidate.²⁴ Suleymanoglu was unsuccessful in his second political attempt. Following Turkey's general election in 2007, Suleymanoglu represented the same party as he had previously in Turkey's 2004 local elections; however, the result was the same. Though Suleymanoglu desired to be a parliamentarian in Turkey and made three thorough attempts, he was unable to become a politician.

5.3 The Death of Naim Suleymanoglu

In 2009, Suleymanoglu was hospitalized after having endured a convulsion attack while in Istanbul. While Suleymanoglu was in intensive care and diagnosed with fluid retention in his liver, the President of the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF) at that time, Hasan Akkus, confirmed that Suleymanoglu's health condition improved.²⁵

Although Suleymanoglu was discharged shortly from the hospital, his liver issue worsened over time. In late 2017, Suleymanoglu was hospitalized due to liver failure caused by cirrhosis, and he required an immediate liver transplant.²⁶ After a donor was found, Suleymanoglu immediately underwent the liver transplant which was performed by Dr. Kamil Yalçın Polat and his medical team on October 6, 2017.²⁷ Notably, during this process, the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2014-present), supported Suleymanoglu and visited him at the hospital. After the liver transplant surgery,

²⁴ Celal Demirbilek, "Kıraç Beldesi'ni Dünya Tanıyacak/The world will recognize Kirac Municipality," *Hurriyet*, January 5, 2004, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/kirac-beldesi-ni-dunya-taniyacak-193808>.

²⁵ Gokhan Hebeci, "Naim Suleymanoglu hastaneye kaldırıldı/Naim Suleymanoglu was hospitalized," *Milliyet*, April 30, 2009, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/skorer/naim-suleymanoglu-hastaneye-kaldirildi-1089271>.

²⁶ Richard Sandomir, "Naim Suleymanoglu, 50, Dies; Weight Lifting's 'Pocket Hercules'," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/obituaries/naim-suleymanoglu-50-dies-weight-liftings-pocket-hercules.html>.

²⁷ "Naim Süleymanoğlu beyin ameliyatına alındı: Hayati tehlikesi devam ediyor/Naim Süleymanoğlu underwent brain surgery: Life danger continues," *Cumhuriyet*, November 11, 2017, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/864356/Naim_Suleymanoglu_beyin_ameliyatina_alindi_Hayati_tehlikesi_devam_ediyor.html.

Suleymanoglu remained in the intensive care unit for more than a month due to increased edema, also known as swelling.²⁸ On November 11th, 2017, Süleymanoğlu was scheduled for a secondary operation due to a brain hemorrhage, but unfortunately, he passed away suddenly on November 18th, 2017.²⁹ The following day, Suleymanoglu's funeral was organized at the Fatih Ulu Mosque in Istanbul, and he was buried at the Edirnekapi Martyr's Cemetery in Istanbul (**See Image 24**).

At the funeral, many press members, both local and foreign sports delegates, and Turkish politicians attended the funeral ceremony.³⁰ For instance, Turkish politicians are as follows; the Prime Minister of Turkey at that time, Binali Yildirim (2016-2018); the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, Hakan Çavuşoğlu; the Justice Minister, Abdulhamit Gul; the Youth and Sports Minister, Osman Aşkın Bak; Previous Prime Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Davutoğlu; Ahmet Özal (son of the previous President and the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Özal), etc.³¹ From the sports world, the following key figures attended the funeral: the General Directorate of Sports of Turkey, Mehmet Baykan; the President of Turkish National Olympic Committee, Ugur Erdener; previous Turkish Graeco-Roman style wrestler, and two-time Olympic champion, Hamza Yerlikaya; the President of Turkish Weightlifting Federation, Tamer Taspinar; former Bulgarian and Turkish national teams weightlifting coach, Enver Turkileri; three-time Olympic champion, Halil Mutlu, and Suleymanoglu's friend and his most prominent opponent, Greek weightlifter, Valerios Leonidis.³²

²⁸ "Olympic champ 'Pocket Hercules' dies at 50," *Arizona Daily Sun*, November 19, 2017, 12, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁹ Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³² *Ibid.*

After the prayer at the funeral had been completed, the Prime Minister of Turkey at that time, Binali Yildirim (2016-2018), stated:

Suleymanoglu has also achieved an inaccessible record by lifting more than his body weight three times and 10 kg. at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, South Korea. He has repeatedly managed to raise our national flag and made our nation proud at international and national stages of competitions. He has repeatedly managed to raise our flag with the moon and star and raised the breasts of 80 million people, our nation. I wish God's mercy once again to our national weightlifter, the legendary athlete Süleymanoğlu, whom we lost at a young age. Rest in peace. I wish my condolences to his family and our nation.³³

Greek weightlifter Valerious Leonidis also stated:

He was the best weightlifter in the world, and he has no equivalent in the world. Would anyone come to the world like Suleymanoglu? Very difficult. He was not my rival but a true friend. This is a very sad day, not particularly for me but also for the weightlifting community and the whole sports community in the world. Suleymanoglu was a hero for me when I (Leonidis) started my weightlifting career. I am lucky to get to know him and compete against him. Suleymanoglu made me an even better weightlifter. I believe nobody would be like him anymore, because he was the best weightlifter of this century. His death made all of us sad, and he will always be in our hearts (**See Image 25**).³⁴

In sum, Suleymanoglu's funeral brought a vastly diverse group together, such as many Turkish politicians and international weightlifting community members. Suleymanoglu's funeral was also showcased in the international media as “breaking news.” For instance, *The Guardian* published a "Naim Süleymanoğlu obituary,"³⁵ while *The Sun* published an article entitled: "Naim Suleymanoglu dead: Three-time Olympic champion weightlifter

³³ Ibid., 39.

³⁴ Ibid., 43.

³⁵ Brian Oliver, “Naim Süleymanoğlu Obituary,” *The Guardian*, last updated December 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/dec/03/naim-suleymanoglu-obituary>.

dies of liver failure aged 50."³⁶ And, in Canada: *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)*: "'Pocket Hercules,' 3-time Olympic weightlifting champion, dies at 50."³⁷



Image 24: Suleymanoglu's resting place at the Edirnekapi Martyr's Cemetery in Istanbul. Source: Taspinar, *Naim Cep Herkulu/Naim the Pocket Hercules*, 37.

³⁶ Alex Terrell, "Naim Suleymanoglu dead: Three-time Olympic champion weightlifter dies of liver failure aged 50," *The Sun*, last updated November 18, 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/othersports/4942381/naim-suleymanoglu-dead-olympic-weightlifter-liver/#:~:text=TURKEY'S%20legendary%20triple%20Olympic%20gold,died%20in%20hospital%20in%20Istanbul.>

³⁷ "'Pocket Hercules,' 3-time Olympic weightlifting champion, dies at 50," *CBC*, last updated, November 18, 2017, [https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/summer/pocket-hercules-olympic-weightlifting-champion-dead-50-1.4408869.](https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/summer/pocket-hercules-olympic-weightlifting-champion-dead-50-1.4408869)



Image 25: Valerios Leonidis kisses Suleymanoglu's casket.

Source: First Alkac, “Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun cenazesinde çarpıcı an...Efsane son yolculuğuna uğurlandı/Stunning moment at Naim Süleymanoğlu's funeral...The legend was sent off on his last journey,” *Hurriyet*, November 19, 2017, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/naim-suleymanoglunun-cenazesi-efsane-son-yolculuguna-ugurlaniyor-40650334>.

5.4 Conclusion

As the core study of this thesis has focused on Naim Suleymanoglu and his story, it is apparent from the analysis how the life of one individual athlete and his respective accomplishments have the capacity to influence and inspire an ethnic community through sports, notably through the Olympic Games. The circumstances surrounding the socio-political environment into which Suleymanoglu was born in Bulgaria in 1967, a background under which ethnic-Turks suffered seriously amidst rising communism, prompted Suleymanoglu's defection from Bulgaria to neighbouring Turkey in 1986, thus depriving Bulgaria of a formidable asset in that nation's quest for international sporting recognition.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, several Balkan regions established nation-states by solidifying nationalistic regimes aimed at suppressing particular minority

groups. This was the case in Bulgaria. The establishment of nation-states has generated an ideology of nation-building and the homogeneity of a collective identity in Bulgaria.³⁸

Although ethnic-Turks were citizens of Bulgaria, they experienced long-term discrimination, particularly in the areas of religion, education, and language. Due to the repressive assimilation campaigns enacted during the communist regime in Bulgaria, spearheaded by the so-called "Bulgarization Project," thousands of ethnic-Turks attempted to leave Bulgaria for Turkey.

Living under the communist regime, Naim Suleymanoglu pursued a weightlifting career as a young promising athlete in the early and mid-1980s. In 1982, the communist Bulgarian government became aware of Naim Suleymanoglu when he won the gold medal at the World Junior Weightlifting Championships in Brazil. Communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, aimed to use Suleymanoglu as a tool to persuade ethnic-Turks not to resist against the military-based government officials. In the end, as an ethnic-Turk, Suleymanoglu was banned from speaking his native language (Turkish) and was forced to change his name to the none-Islamic name "Naum Shalamanov." However, Suleymanoglu's international and national levels of sporting successes made him a role model in Bulgaria as he encouraged and influenced ethnic-Turks in Bulgaria to fight for their rights against the communist Bulgarian government's assimilation policies. Partly from Suleymanoglu's endeavour and influence, ethnic-Turks strove to reclaim their native language and cultural values.

While Suleymanoglu was celebrating his success at the World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne in 1986, he defected to Turkey. Since then, Suleymanoglu

³⁸ K uc kcan, "Re-claiming identity," 64.

frequently used public platforms at his disposal to speak out about how the communist regime in Bulgaria assimilated ethnic-Turks. In particular, at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, where Suleymanoglu performed extraordinarily well. Suleymanoglu's voice was heard internationally. He was invited to the White House in the USA by President Ronald Reagan to discuss the Bulgarization Project. Subsequently, international human rights organizations began to investigate the assimilation campaign in Bulgaria. In late 1989, due to international pressure, Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov declared that he would open the border for ethnic-Turks who wanted to immigrate to Turkey. This was in response to Zhivkov, after the Prime Minister of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, discussed with Suleymanoglu whether ethnic-Turks could come to Turkey. Shortly thereafter, Ozal opened the Turkish border to the ethnic-Turks, which led to the 1989 exodus. The repressive policies of Bulgarian communists triggered a largescale exodus of ethnic-Turks from the country. Köksal and Gül stated that by the summer of 1989, approximately 350,000 Bulgarian citizens poured into Turkey, which was the most massive group migration of people after WW II.³⁹ Weightlifting champion, Naim Suleymanoglu, was one of the individuals that influenced the exodus.

During Suleymanoglu's rising popularity and enormous successes in weightlifting, Suleymanoglu won his second Olympic gold medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. Following the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, spectators witnessed an epic weightlifting battle between Valerios Leonidis of Greece and Naim Suleymanoglu of Turkey. Suleymanoglu narrowly won the gold medal, which made him history's first weightlifter to win three successive Olympic gold medals. It is worth highlighting here

³⁹ Köksal and Gül, "Application of Transitional Justice Mechanisms," 122.

that with Suleymanoglu's example and inspiration, many ethnic-Turk athletes followed in Suleymanoglu's footsteps, prompting an eventual change in the Olympic landscape in Turkey. This development not only established the infrastructure of weightlifting but also increased the popularity of weightlifting a popular in Turkey.

Despite Suleymanoglu's retirement after the 1996 Atlanta Games, he dealt with the consistent pressures exuded by the Turkish media and Turkish officials for him to participate in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Agreeing to participate, he failed to lift three times in the snatch, and he was disqualified from the competition. The result was disappointing for him but not entirely unexpected.

After Suleymanoglu retired from an active weightlifting career, he served the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) and the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF) to help promote weightlifting worldwide and in Turkey. Additionally, Suleymanoglu attempted to become a politician at the Grand Assembly of Turkey in 1999, 2004, and 2007. However, all three attempts were unsuccessful. In 2017, Suleymanoglu passed away as a result of liver failure and was buried at the Edirnekapi Martyr's Cemetery in Istanbul. A vast crowd from all over the world attended, including Suleymanoglu's old teammates, coaches, family members, politicians, and even his most celebrated opponent, Valerios Leonidis of Greece. The international media highlighted Suleymanoglu's funeral. And major breaking news, and major sports organizations such as the IOC, the IWF, and National Weightlifting Associations sent their condolences.

Suleymanoglu became an Olympic icon, indeed a "national hero" in Turkey.⁴⁰ With Suleymanoglu's effort, not only did Turkey win its first gold medal in weightlifting

⁴⁰ In 2001, Suleymanoglu was awarded the Olympic Order.

at the Olympic Games, but Suleymanoglu also became an idol for ethnic-Turkish athletes who wished to compete and represent Turkey in the sports world. As a result of Suleymanoglu's sporting achievements and his iconic presence, the sport of weightlifting continued to be developed and refined in Turkey, which solidified the Turkish presence in weightlifting into a worldwide brand as it is recognized today.⁴¹

⁴¹ It is worth stating here that since Suleymanoglu's death, two-sport high schools, international & national weightlifting tournaments, and a multi-purpose sport facility in Turkey were named after him. In 2019, the Naim Suleymanoglu Sport Academy High School was established in Istanbul. Another Naim Suleymanoglu Sport Academic High School was also established in Mersin, Turkey, in 2018. The Naim Suleymanoglu Sport Facility opened in Bursa in 2019, and the Naim Suleymanoglu International & National Weightlifting Championships have taken place in Turkey since 2018.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Key Milestones of Naim Suleymanoglu's Life Journey			
Name	Explanation of Events	Dates	Significance
Naim Suleymanov's first international tournament competing for Bulgaria	The World Junior Weightlifting Championships in São Paulo.	1982	Suleymanov introduced himself to the weightlifting community.
Suleymanov's name changing process	Under the Bulgarization Project, ethnic-Turks were forced to change their names to Slavic names in Bulgaria in the 1980s. Suleymanov was among them.	1985	After Suleymanov returned home from the training camp in Melbourne, Australia, his name was changed to the Slavic name "Naum Shalamanov." Then, Suleymanov decided to defect to Turkey from Bulgaria.
The defection	After Shalamanov's name-changing process was completed, Shalamanov sought an opportunity to defect to Turkey while competing at the 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne.	1986	After Suleymanov won the gold medal at the 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championships, he escaped from the banquet. Shortly after, his asylum application was accepted by the Turkish government, and he flew to Turkey in December of 1986.
Re-naming process	After Shalamanov's arrival in Turkey, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey immediately granted Shalamanov Turkish citizenship. Shalamanov regained his Turkish name, "Naim Suleymanoglu."	1986	This was the final "re-naming process" for Naim Suleymanoglu.
Suleymanoglu's first international tournament competing for Turkey	1988 European Weightlifting Championships in Cardiff, England.	1988	The significance of the 1988 European Weightlifting Championships is as follows: a) Suleymanoglu competed and won the gold medal for Turkey at an international level for the first time in history. b) Turkey won its first gold medal in weightlifting at the international level.
Suleymanoglu's Olympic Games journey	a) 1988 Seoul Olympic Games	a)1988	a) The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games was Suleymanoglu's first Olympic experience. He won the gold medal by breaking 6 world records and 9

	<p>b) 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games</p> <p>c) 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games</p> <p>d) 2000 Sydney Olympic Games</p>	<p>b)1992</p> <p>c)1996</p> <p>d)2000</p>	<p>Olympic records. This was also the first gold medal for Turkey at the Olympic Games in a sport other than wrestling.</p> <p>b) Suleymanoglu won his second gold medal in a row at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games.</p> <p>c) Suleymanoglu won his third gold medal in a row at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, and he became the first weightlifter who consecutively won the gold medal three times at the Olympic Games.</p> <p>d) Suleymanoglu failed three times in the snatch and disqualified for the clean and jerk discipline at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Shortly after, he announced his retirement.</p>
Suleymanoglu's vice-presidency for the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF)	Suleymanoglu announced his vice-presidential candidacy for the IWF.	2000 - 2004	Suleymanoglu became the youngest vice-president in IWF history.
Suleymanoglu's death	Suleymanoglu was hospitalized due to liver failure.	2017	Suleymanoglu died due to a brain hemorrhage which was subsequent to the liver transplant surgery.

APPENDIX 2.⁴² NAIM SULEYMANOGLU'S PERFORMANCE FOR BULGARIA

YEAR	Location	Category (kg.)	Snatch (kg.)	Clean & Jerk (kg.)	Total (kg.)	Medal
1982	Sao Paulo (Brazil)	52	110	140	250	Gold
1983	Moscow (USSR)	56	130	160	290	Silver
1984	Sarajevo (Yugoslavia)	56	142.5	185.5	328	Gold
1984	Vitoria (Spain)	56	130	167.5	297.5	Gold
1984	Varna (Bulgaria)	56	132.5	165	297.5	Gold
1985	Monte Carlo (Monaco)	60	145	186	331	Gold
1985	Katowice (Poland)	60	140	172.5	312.5	Gold
1985	Södertälje (Sweden)	60	142.5	180	322.5	Gold
1986	Sofia (Bulgaria)	60	147.5	187.5	335	Gold
1986	Karl-Marx-Stadt (East Germany)	60	145	187.5	332.5	Gold
1986	Melbourne (Australia)	60	148	174.5	322.5	Gold

⁴² Appendix 2 and 3 include information that has been compiled from the following sources: Tayfun Bayindir, *The Pocket Hercules*; Enver Turkileri, *The Pocket Hercules*; Tamer Taspinar, *Naim the Pocket Hercules*; Tufan Turenc, *Naim Suleymanoglu*; The National Olympic Committee of Turkey (official website); International and Turkish Weightlifting Federations (official websites); *Sport Illustrated Vault*; *Milliyet*; *Hurriyet*; *The New York Times*; *The Los Angeles Times*; *South Florida Sun Sentinel*; *The Sacramento Bee*. These sources can be found in the Bibliography.

APPENDIX 3. NAIM SULEYMANOGLU'S PERFORMANCE FOR TURKEY

YEAR	Location year	Category (kg.)	Snatch (kg.)	Clean & Jerk (kg.)	Total (kg.)	Medal
1988	Cardiff (England)	60	150	180	330	Gold
1988	Seoul (South Korea)	60	152.5	190	342.5	Gold
1989	Athens (Greece)	60	145	172.5	317.5	Gold
1990			Injured			
1991	Donaueschingen (Germany)	60	137.5	172.5	310	Gold
1992	Szekszárd (Hungary)	60	142.5	170	312.5	Silver
1992	Barcelona (Spain)	60	142.5	177.5	320	Gold
1993	Melbourne (Australia)	64	145	177.5	322.5	Gold
1994	Istanbul (Turkey)	64	147.5	182.5	330	Gold
1994	Sokolov (Czech Republic)	64	145	180	325	Gold
1995	Guangzhou (China)	64	147.5	180	327.5	Gold
1995	Warsaw (Poland)	64	142.5	182.5	325	Gold
1996	Atlanta (USA)	64	147.5	187.5	335	Gold
2000	Sofia (Bulgaria)	62	140	170	310	Bronze
2000	Sydney (Australia)	62	145	X	X	X

Curriculum Vitae

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2011-2015 B.A. (Physical Education & Sport Management)

George Brown College
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
2016-2018 P.M. (Project Management)

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2019-2021 M.A. (Kinesiology, Sociocultural Studies)

Honours and Awards: Western University, School of Kinesiology Graduate Student Summer Term Bursary, 2020.

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Related Work Experience: Teaching Assistant
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Special Topic: Legal Issues for Kinesiologists, 2019 (Fall Term).
Sports Marketing, 2020 (Winter Term).
Special Topic: Legal Issues for Kinesiologists, 2020 (Fall Term).
Sport in Development, 2021 (Winter Term).

Presentations: Accepted for Presentation, “Nationalism: A Threat Towards the Olympic Games,” Center for Sociocultural Sport and Olympic Research 3rd Annual Conference, California State University, Fullerton, California, USA, March 2020. (Postponed due to COVID-19).