

A Turk at the Summit: The Timeless Legacy of Naim Süleymanoğlu

Zirvede Bir Türk: Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Zamansız Mirası

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Abstract

This study examines the extraordinary life and career of Naim Süleymanoğlu, known as "Pocket Hercules." Born to a Turkish family in Bulgaria and later competing for Turkey, Süleymanoğlu's journey has left an indelible mark not only in the field of weightlifting, where he achieved unparalleled success, but also in the realm of political and personal struggles. Süleymanoğlu not only shattered world records but also became a symbol of national pride and a beacon of hope during times of political unrest. His three Olympic gold medals, numerous world and European championships, and the world records he set stand as a testament to his prowess. However, his legacy extends beyond athletic achievements, encompassing a tale of resilience, an unwavering pursuit of excellence, and the overcoming of cultural and political barriers. This article seeks to elucidate Süleymanoğlu's impact on the world of sports, his influence on the socio-political landscape of his era, and how he became a lasting icon in the history of sports.

Keywords: Assimilation, Turkish sport, Weightlifting

Özet

Bu araştırma, "Cep Herkülü" olarak bilinen Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun olağanüstü hayatını ve kariyerini incelemektedir. Bulgaristan'da Türk bir ailenin çocuğu olarak dünyaya gelen ve daha sonra Türkiye için yarışan Süleymanoğlu'nun yolculuğu, halterdeki benzersiz başarılarının yanı sıra siyasi ve kişisel mücadelelerle de damgasını vurmuştur. Süleymanoğlu sadece dünya rekorlarını kırmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda ulusal gururun bir sembolü ve siyasi huzursuzluk dönemlerinde bir umut ışığı olmuştur. Üç Olimpiyat altın madalyası, sayısız dünya ve Avrupa şampiyonluğu ile kırmış olduğu dünya rekorları onun hünerlerinin bir kanıtıdır. Ancak, onun mirası atletik başarılarının ötesine uzanmaktadır. Bu bir dayanıklılık hikayesi, amansız bir mükemmellik arayışı, kültürel ve siyasi engellerin aşılması olarak görülmektedir. Bu makale Süleymanoğlu'nun spor üzerindeki etkisini, döneminin sosyo-politik manzarası üzerindeki etkisini ve spor tarihinde nasıl kalıcı bir ikon haline geldiğini araştırarak ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Asimilasyon, Halter, Türk sporu

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INTRODUCTION

Until the outbreak of World War II, power was predominantly associated with military elements. However, subsequent periods witnessed the emergence of soft power due to factors such as the onset of the Cold War, the global race for hegemony, and states' inability to derive sufficient benefits from hard power elements. Over time, soft power gained popularity (Sümer, 2020). These global changes and transformations have brought about increased global competition. This competition has also made its presence felt in the realm of sports. During this period, sports began to be utilized as a tool to exert influence on societies and to achieve strategic objectives (Batmaz et al., 2016). The most significant area in which sports have been influential is politics. Sports and politics have coexisted and mutually benefited each other throughout history. Both elements have utilized each other for the purpose of attaining power, controlling power, effecting change through power, and exerting influence. Therefore, the sports industry, the popularity of athletes, and the influence of fans have consistently attracted the attention of politicians (Bingöl & Polat, 2019).

Undoubtedly, sports are considered the most significant social and cultural construct, bringing together large audiences and gaining increasing importance in international relations (Happel & Kramer, 1982). In the Olympics, athletes are not only pursuing agreement, friendship, and peace but also examples of them pursuing their interests abroad. Statements made by politicians and statesmen further illustrate this assertion. In one of his speeches, U.S. Attorney General B. Kennedy stated, "To regain superiority in the Olympics as a means of once again demonstrating our true power is a national goal of ours (Coakley, 1986)," highlighting that sports serve as a platform for demonstrating power on the international stage. Although there are many politicians who exploit sports and athletes for their own political interests, there are also those who believe in the unifying power of sports and strive to use it in that direction (Allison, 1986).

These processes have led to the utilization of sports for purposes diverging from its fundamental essence. Recent events in our history serve as evidence of this phenomenon. In this context, it becomes evident how important the sporting career and the national identity struggle of Turkish weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu are. Through his international achievements, he not only broke world records but also used the power of sports to shed light on assimilation practices targeting the Turkish community living in Bulgaria and provided a lifeline to his oppressed compatriots, making their plight known worldwide. Within this framework, this research examines the extraordinary life and career of Naim Süleymanoğlu. He not only shattered world

records but also became a symbol of national pride and a beacon of hope during periods of political unrest. His legacy extends beyond athletic achievements. It is viewed as a tale of resilience, an unrelenting pursuit of excellence, and the overcoming of cultural and political barriers. This study seeks to elucidate Süleymanoğlu's impact on the world of sports, his influence on the socio-political landscape of his era, and how he became a lasting icon in the history of sports.

Early Life and Athletic Career

Naim Süleymanov, one of the most distinguished weightlifters in the history of world weightlifting, was born on January 23, 1967, in the town of Ptichar, within the borders of Bulgaria, as a child of a miner and farmer in a strong Turkish minority of 2 million people. His early affinity for strength-based sports, as evidenced by his childhood activities involving lifting stones and tree branches, suggests his early interest in weightlifting (Sandomir, 2017).

At the tender age of 9, when he stood at a height of 3 feet 9 inches (114.3 cm) and carried a weight of 55 kilograms, Naim Süleymanov articulated his aspiration to commence a career in the sport of weightlifting. Evaluations conducted by a Bulgarian sports institution indicated his predisposition for a future in weightlifting (History of Olympic Weightlifting, 2023). In 1974, Süleymanov matriculated at Mestanlı Elementary School, where he successfully completed his initial 3 years of formal training. Subsequently, in 1977, Enver Türkileri, a distinguished weightlifting coach based in Kırcaali, started a dedicated weightlifting team aimed at nurturing the talents of Turkish youth with an interest in this discipline. Türkileri's overarching goal in founding weightlifting teams in both Mestanlı and Kırcaali was to foster a sense of pride among Turkish youth in these locales and to augment the representation of Turkish athletes in the realm of weightlifting within the Rhodope region (Güleri, 2004). Owing to his stature, characterized by a compact physique, Süleymanov's initial mentor, Hilmi Pekünlü, steered him towards the pursuit of weightlifting. This sentiment was articulated by Taşpınar (2019) in the following manner:

Naim Süleymanov harbored a profound ardor for athletics. Adjacent to his residence lay a stadium, a frequent haunt where he indulged in swimming. Moreover, he actively participated in gymnastics and wrestling. However, it was at the age of nine that his foray into the realm of weightlifting commenced, thanks to the serendipitous encounter with the weightlifting mentor, Hilmi Pekünlü. During this juncture, weightlifting held a prominent status as a favored sport in Bulgaria, boasting the production of esteemed world and Olympic champions. Consequently, Süleymanov aspired to emulate these luminaries and initiated his

tutelage under Coach Hilmi in Mestanlı. With unwavering determination, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to these training sessions for a period spanning one and a half years.

Pekünlü, ensuring Süleymanov's overall health and fitness, accompanied him to the hospital to conduct a thorough medical evaluation, affirming his suitability to persist in the pursuit of weightlifting. A mere five months later, Süleymanov achieved victory in a local weightlifting competition held in Mestanlı, as reported by Trtspor in 2018. In 1976, Süleymanov took part in the Bulgarian Youth Tournaments, competing in the young category, hosted in Kırcaali. During this competition, he successfully executed a snatch of 25 kg, as documented by Taşpınar (2019). This performance held particular significance, as it allowed Süleymanov to showcase his prodigious talents to the discerning eyes of national coaches from Bulgaria. In June of 1977, Süleymanov was bestowed with the prestigious role of flag bearer for the Bulgarian team at the opening ceremony of a notable competition. This event saw the participation of the Kırcaali weightlifting team alongside the team from North Sestina, which was representing Soviet Russia. Following this significant occasion, Türkileri and Pekünlü played a crucial role in convincing Süleymanov and his family about the importance of continuing his intensive training schedule under Türkileri's mentorship, a detail Türkileri later recounted in a 1997 publication. Eventually, Süleymanov took a pivotal step in his career by joining the Sports Academy Institution in Kırcaali. This association with the academy was instrumental in advancing his educational goals and honing his skills in weightlifting, a development Smith highlighted in his 1992 work.

Following the year 1970, the Eastern Bloc nations, Bulgaria included, adopted scientific methodologies aimed at augmenting the athletic performance of their competitors in prestigious events such as the Olympic Games and various international competitions (Allison, 1994). Being firm believers in the idea of Soviet superiority, Soviet-aligned countries aimed to excel in sports that relied on muscular strength, such as weightlifting, wrestling, and boxing (Girginov, 1998). In pursuit of elevated levels of athletic achievement and the expansion of its athlete pool, Bulgaria experienced a notable proliferation in the establishment of sports-oriented educational institutions and research centers during the Cold War period, spanning from 1947 to 1991. This surge in infrastructure development held profound implications for Süleymanov, given his initiation into weightlifting at a remarkably tender age, as elucidated in Türkileri's account in 1997. Süleymanov became the national champion in weightlifting in the youth and junior categories in Bulgaria by the time he turned fourteen. In the year 1982, Naim Süleymanov earned the privilege of being included in the prestigious Bulgarian national weightlifting team. Türkileri

observed the exceptional nature of this achievement, considering that Süleymanov, a youthful athlete of merely 14-15 years old, was integrated into a team composed primarily of athletes in their mid to late twenties, as documented by Trtspor in 2018.

In 1982, Süleymanov achieved championship status by winning two gold medals at the World Junior Weightlifting Championships held in Brazil (Olympics, 2023). According to Türkileri (1997), this accomplishment was an unprecedented success in the field of weightlifting. Süleymanov's recognition by followers of elite weightlifting competitions worldwide, resulting from his success in Brazil, was not only attributed to the proud support of the Turkish community but also to his role as a role model within his ethnic group. Notably, Naim Süleymanov was the recipient of a series of valuable tokens of appreciation, which encompassed a salary, an apartment located in Kırcaali, and an automobile, all graciously provided by the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF), as chronicled by Türeñç in 2020. Within the framework of the communist system, such benevolent gestures were not bestowed indiscriminately, underscoring their exceptional nature. It is worth highlighting that in the year 1983, Süleymanov was extended an invitation to participate in a tournament held in the United States. During this event, he garnered the attention of the U.S. media, who bestowed upon him the moniker of "Pocket Hercules," a recognition of his remarkable achievements, as reported by Trtspor in 2018.

With respect to the 1984 Summer Olympic Games held in Los Angeles, Bulgaria, in solidarity with the United States' decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow as a protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, opted to participate in the Eastern Bloc's coordinated boycott of the 1984 Games. Consequently, Bulgaria did not participate in the 1984 Summer Olympics (Sandomir, 2017). Perhaps if Bulgaria had taken part in the Summer Olympics, it might have provided an opportunity for Naim Süleymanov to set a new record.

Throughout his career, representing Bulgaria, Naim Süleymanov achieved:

- *World Championships: Three gold medals (1982 Sao Paulo, 1985 Södertälje, 1986 Sofia) and one silver (1983 Moscow).*
- *European Championships: Three gold medals (1984 Vitoria, 1985 Karl-Marx-Stadt, 1988 Katowice) and one silver (1983 Moscow).*
- *World Cups: Three gold medals (1984 Sarajevo, 1985 Monte Carlo, 1986 Melbourne).*
- *World Cup Finals: Two gold medals (1984 Sarajevo, 1985 Monte Carlo).*

- *Friendship Games: One gold medal (1984 Varna). Representing the Republic of Turkey, he accomplished:*
- *the Olympics: Three Olympic gold medals (1988 Seoul, 1992 Barcelona, 1996 Atlanta).*
- *World Championships: Five world championships (1989 Athens, 1991 Donaueschingen, 1993 Melbourne, 1994 Istanbul, 1995 Guangzhou).*
- *European Championships: Four gold medals (1988 Cardiff, 1989 Athens, 1994 Sokolov, 1995 Warsaw), one silver (1992 Szekszárd), and one bronze (2000 Sofia).*

The Bulgarian Government's Assimilation Operation (Bulgarisation)

Under the "Nation System" of the Ottomans, which contributed to social and theological self-determination, Bulgaria's government could not assert political dominance in their territory. The Ottoman Empire did not compel the Bulgarians to convert to the Islamic faith (Loffe, 2018). Nevertheless, those Bulgarians who embraced Islam while preserving their Slavic languages and traditions came to be known as "Pomaks." A subset of these individuals who adopted the Islamic faith also assimilated into the Turkish ethnic group. This assimilation and the migration of many Turks to Bulgaria caused a Turkish Muslim majority before Bulgaria gained independence (Apostolov, 2018).

After its victory over the Ottoman Empire in the 1877-1878 war, Bulgaria secured its independence, a historical event noted by Crampton in 1997. In the period following the Ottoman loss, Russian and Bulgarian leaders swiftly worked to dismantle the remaining Ottoman governance in the area. The Bulgarian population predominantly consisted of Slavic Orthodox Christians. Despite treaties obliging Bulgaria to preserve the rights of its Muslim citizens, numerous Islamic buildings, such as mosques, schools, and houses, were demolished, as highlighted by Kamusella in 2019. These actions, coupled with assimilation policies, led to the migration of many Muslims from Bulgaria. In the inaugural census post-independence under the Bulgarian Principality, ILib-Lister in 2017 reported that 26.3% of people identified Turkish/Gagauz as their native language. Yet, by the 1934 census, the last under the Bulgarian Kingdom, only 9.7% claimed Turkish ethnicity, according to 2017 population data.

In World War II, Bulgaria sided with Nazi Germany. Following the war, the Soviet army facilitated the rise of a communist government in Bulgaria, mainly through a military takeover in 1944. Under this communist regime, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria faced severe hardships, as their systematic assimilation was a key policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). The BCP aimed to meld all minorities into a unified Bulgarian nation. To fulfill this objective, the

BCP imposed restrictions on Turks, including bans on Turkish-language education, publication of Turkish newspapers, Turkish-language radio broadcasts, and the practice of Islam. The BCP even denied the existence of ethnic Turks in the country (Köksal & Gül, 2013). An instance of this policy was evident in the early communist period in Bulgaria when BCP leader Georgi Dimitrov, at a party meeting, articulated the party's strategy in these matters.

This matter should stay amongst ourselves. We are facing a significant issue, not a relic of the past. Along our southern borders, there are people who are not Bulgarian. This has been a chronic problem for us. As the Communist Party and the Government of Bulgary, it's our duty to find a pretext to displace them and move them elsewhere. In their place, we should bring in those of Bulgarian origin (Kamil, 2016)

In 1954, after Stalin's death, Todor Jivkov ascended to the helm of the Communist Party and thereby the nation. Jivkov's tenure saw a refined concept of the Bulgarian nation and the launch of new "Bulgarisation" drives. A significant campaign during this period was the "Revival Process" in the 1980s, targeting the assimilation of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. This "Revival Process" involved heightened assimilation tactics, compelling Muslims who had retained their Turkish or Islamic names to adopt Bulgarian ones instead, as reported by The UN Refugee Agency in 2004. This policy effectively aimed to erase their ethnic identities. Küçükcan (1999) observed that the Turkish community in Bulgaria actively resisted this policy, striving to preserve their ethnic and Islamic identities. This resistance led to escalating tensions, prompting the Bulgarian government to arrest and detain resisting Turks to quell the dissent. Nonetheless, Atasoy and Soykan in 2011 made the following observation:

... Turks' organized resistance against the regime faced significant challenges. The resistance efforts were hampered by severe winter conditions, intentional disruptions of telephone lines and transportation, and the confiscation of firearms from Muslim-Turkish hunters. Additionally, there were accounts of numerous Turks slaughtered in different villages, which served to further terrorize and obstruct the efforts of the resistance movement. These factors collectively impeded the Turkish community's ability to effectively oppose the assimilation policies and actions of the regime...

The communist Bulgarian authorities reported the establishment of the "Belene Concentration Camp" near Kırcaali, where torture was inflicted upon Turks who were resisting for their rights, and they were killed. Turhan (2008) reported that during the Bulgarization Project, approximately 2,500 Turks lost their lives in a specific camp. Between early 1984 and late 1985,

the name-changing operation, referred to as "the reconstruction of Bulgarian name," intensified. This period saw Bulgarian officials outright denying the existence of the Turkish population in Bulgaria, as highlighted by Küçükcan in 1999. This phase of assimilation, known as "The Revival Process," was followed by a mass expulsion event termed "The Great Excursion," during which over 300,000 Bulgarian Turks were forced to leave the country, as documented by The UN Refugee Agency in 2004. During this time, Turks were prohibited from performing their burial rites, and numerous Muslim tombstones bearing Turkish inscriptions were destroyed. The Bulgarian government also banned the observance of Islamic holidays such as Ramadan, traditional Islamic attire, and the practice of circumcising Muslim children. Eminov in 1997 made further observations on this matter, noting the following:

Muslim mothers and fathers had to accept declarations promising not to circumcise their sons. To enforce this ban, doctors routinely conducted inspections in Muslim households and schools to check little kids and ensure compliance with the circumcision ban. In cases where it was found that the circumcision ban had been violated, both the parents and the individual who performed the circumcision faced punitive measures. This policy was part of the broader effort to suppress Islamic practices and assimilate the Muslim population into Bulgarian society.

Atasoy and Soykan (2011) report the following:

For those who opposed the process of returning to their roots or did not root for government acts, the initial action was dismissal from their jobs, then interrogations at police stations and attempts to persuade them to cooperate came, and the third step was deportation or imprisonment.

In 1989, the communist leader Todor Jivkov famously declared, "No Turks are found in Bulgaria" (Neuburger, 1997). Looking at the current period, Bulgaria's existing constitution provides for religious freedom, but it defines the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the "traditional religion" of Bulgaria (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2006). It is observed that the harsh assimilation policies pursued in the past are no longer in effect (Kamusella, 2019).

Repatriation

While Süleymanov continued his active sports career, the process of assimilation against Turks in Bulgaria intensified. To compel Turks to accept the replacement of their names with non-Islamic Slavic names, the region of Kırcaali was besieged by the Bulgarian army for days (Alfano, 1988a). Upon hearing that Kırcaali was surrounded by the Bulgarian army, Süleymanov went home to confirm the safety of his family. However, he was stopped by the police on the

way. His situation changed when a police officer recognized him from media coverage, and he was allowed to proceed on the road to Kırcaali (Türenç, 2020).

Due to Naim Süleymanov's registration with the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) under the name Naim Süleymanov, changing his name posed a challenge. Changing Süleymanov's name would cause a dispute between the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF) and the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF). Thus, the renaming process was temporarily suspended, as the Bulgarian authorities awaited consent from the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF). Under Soviet influence, the IWF's rules were modified, leading to the sanction of changing Süleymanov's name to "Naum Shalamanov" (Türkileri, 1997). Süleymanov's accomplishments in weightlifting not only gained him recognition worldwide but also were leveraged by the Bulgarian government as a strategy to weaken the resistance among the Turkish population against the assimilation drive and, more broadly, the Bulgarization Project (Trtspor, 2018).

Athletes could only exit Bulgaria by partaking in international sports events. They had to comply with the supervision of Bulgarian officials and follow government-imposed guidelines during these competitions (Trtspor, 2017). Despite these constraints, Süleymanov stood firm in his refusal to alter his name and continued practicing his Islamic faith, thus defying religious prohibitions. Through these actions, he actively resisted and challenged the Bulgarian authorities, protesting against the infringement of his personal rights (Trtspor, 2018).

In 1985, Süleymanov, along with his teammates on the Bulgarian national weightlifting team, went to Melbourne, Australia, for a fifteen-day practice session in preparation for the upcoming World Cup Weightlifting Championship. Post-World War II, many Turks emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey and then to Melbourne. Consequently, the Turkish community in Melbourne, upon learning about the Bulgarian team's coming, got a hold of Süleymanov, prompting considerations about him seeking asylum from Bulgaria (Türenç, 2020). Rasim Arda, a Turkish emigrant from Bulgaria residing in Melbourne, initiated contact with Süleymanov (Trtspor, 2018). Süleymanov was initially reluctant to seek asylum, partly due to concerns for his family back in Bulgaria. Another factor contributing to his hesitation was his ambition to be the first weightlifter to secure three consecutive World Cup Championships (Türenç, 2020). As a result, these early discussions about asylum did not succeed.

In Melbourne, the Bulgarian state relayed to Süleymanov that when he returned, officials would meet him at Sofia Airport to initiate his name change. They informed him that he would

take the Slavic name "Naum Shalamanov." Upon arrival at Sofia Airport, a government official with a police background greeted Süleymanov, confiscating his passport, which marked the beginning of the name change process (Goldblatt & Acton, 2016). Süleymanov forcefully signed a declaration that he was willfully changing his name, and was then escorted to a radio station to publicly announce his new name, a move intended to influence other Turks to follow suit. After completing this process, Shalamanov came back to his hometown of Kırcaali, later recounting that the experience felt as if "boiling water was poured over his head" (Odatv, 2019). This forced name change became a turning point for Shalamanov. Enver Türkileri captured Shalamanov's sentiments on this experience as follows:

I found him by himself, tears brimming in his eyes, voice shaking. His heart was shattered. It was evident he was crying internally. I was equally shocked, at a loss for actions... We spent a long time talking, trying to somewhat uplift each other's spirits. I am certain that day will forever be etched in Naim's memory. (Türkileri, 1997).

On that significant day, Shalamanov resolved to pursue asylum in Turkey and reveal the harsh conditions and oppressive treatment faced by Turks in Bulgaria. He kept this decision private, particularly out of concern that the Bulgarian government might uncover his plans. The 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championship, scheduled to take place in Melbourne, Australia, presented him with an appropriate chance to act on his intention to seek asylum (Alfano, 1988a). This decision marked a pivotal moment in Shalamanov's life, reflecting his determination to stand against the injustices he and his community faced.

In 1985, Nikola Mollov, Secretary General of the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF), did not authorize Shalamanov's participation in the World Weightlifting Championship in Södertälje, Sweden, due to suspicions from the Bulgarian Intelligence Agency that he might seek asylum. Previously, at the 1985 European Weightlifting Championship in Katowice, Poland, Shalamanov met Turkish weightlifter Mehmet Altın, competing in the same weight category. Shalamanov shared his dissatisfaction with competing for Bulgaria under his new Slavic name, and his thoughts on asylum in Turkey. This conversation made its way to the Bulgarian Intelligence Agency, leading to plans to keep Shalamanov in Bulgaria for the Södertälje Championship, potentially replacing him with Stefan Dimitrov in the 60 kg category (Türkileri, 1997). Contrary to these plans, Shalamanov, under close watch by national security officers, did participate in Södertälje and secured the gold medal (Taşpınar, 2019). Following this, he competed in Monte Carlo for the World Cup Weightlifting Championship, winning another gold. After this victory, he was invited by the Bulgarian communist leader Todor Jivkov to his

residence, where Jivkov presented him with the "State Order" (Türenç, 2020). The Turkish press lauded Shalamanov as the "first Turk to impress Jivkov" (Türkileri, 1997). Motivated, he triumphed at the 1986 Sofia World Weightlifting Championship, winning gold (Taşpınar, 2019). In 1986, as a newly renamed member of the Bulgarian team, Shalamanov traveled to Melbourne for the World Cup, reigniting his aspirations to seek asylum (Prenesti, 1986).

Shalamanov successfully achieved his initial goal by clinching a gold medal at the Melbourne World Cup. His next challenge was to devise a plan for seeking asylum. Following the weightlifting events, the Bulgarian team visited a restaurant to celebrate their achievements. Amid the celebration, Shalamanov sought an escape opportunity, but the spotlight on him for his historic gold medal win made it difficult. At the Leonda restaurant, Bulgarian police officers, who had been monitoring the team since leaving Sofia, joined the weightlifters at their table, heightening Shalamanov's anxiety and complicating his escape plans. During the meal, Shalamanov noticed Turkish Rasim Arda at the bar. Arda had originally planned to facilitate Shalamanov's departure from the hotel, but the team's impromptu decision to dine out first altered this arrangement. Informed by the hotel reception about the team's location, Arda came to the restaurant. Seeing each other from across the street, Arda communicated nonverbally, indicating the difficulty of a face-to-face conversation due to the constant surveillance by the police. When Shalamanov and a teammate went to the bar to smoke, Shalamanov managed to sit beside Arda. Arda revealed that the asylum plan was ready to be executed (Odatv, 2019). He assured Shalamanov that after returning to the hotel, he would discreetly escort him to safety. However, Shalamanov was reluctant to go back to the hotel, preferring an immediate escape from Leonda (Trtspor, 2018). Sensing Shalamanov's urgency, Arda quickly adapted the plan, informing him that a white car would be waiting near the restaurant to transport him to a secure location (Trtspor, 2017).

After rejoining his team at the dining table, Shalamanov excused himself, claiming he needed to use the restroom. Heading towards the restaurant's entrance, he spotted a white car waiting outside. Without hesitation, he quickly entered the vehicle and they drove off (Taşpınar, 2019). Los Angeles Times reporter Harvey in 1986 noted that for the Bulgarian authorities and the weightlifting team, Melbourne marked the last place they saw Shalamanov. During the journey, Shalamanov changed vehicles, and Musa Sayan, a friend of Rasim Arda, took him to a safe house where he stayed out of sight for multiple days. The Bulgarian authorities soon realized his absence, leading to confusion and chaos. Amidst this, Arda managed to slip away into the

restaurant's kitchen (Odatv, 2019). Meanwhile, the Bulgarian authorities declared that Shalamanov had been kidnapped by a terrorist group (Alfano, 1988a). Shalamanov's situation took a critical turn; to legally process his asylum, he needed to formally request it at the Turkish Embassy in Melbourne (Goldblatt & Acton, 2016). Shalamanov and Arda reached out to the embassy, but their claims were met with skepticism, primarily due to Shalamanov's Slavic-sounding name, leading to their asylum request being denied. This confused the embassy, and despite several phone conversations over three days, no progress was made. His disappearance, although widely reported in global media, didn't convince the embassy of his Bulgarian Turkish identity. The rejection by the Turkish Embassy created a state of alarm for Arda and his associates. They faced the risk of being labeled terrorists by Bulgarian authorities for the alleged abduction of a world-champion weightlifter. It became imperative to devise an alternate strategy. Should the Turkish Embassy in Melbourne persist in denying Shalamanov's request, he planned to redirect his asylum efforts from Turkey to the United States (Odatv, 2019). This situation represented a critical juncture in Shalamanov's life, as he navigated complex geopolitical and personal challenges in seeking asylum.

During Shalamanov's concealment in Melbourne, Bulgarian officials transported his private effects to his family in Bulgaria (Hürriyet, 1986). His father engulfed in anger and sorrow, criticized the Bulgarian authorities for failing to safeguard his son. Although aware of his son's asylum attempt, the Bulgarian officials relentlessly interrogated him (Odatv, 2019). Notably, Shalamanov had never disclosed his asylum plans to his family (Alfano, 1988a). The Bulgarian government exerted pressure on Shalamanov's family to ascertain his location, but they were uninformed of his whereabouts. The Bulgarian authorities also scrutinized Shalamanov's weightlifting coach, Enver Türkileri, to ascertain whether Shalamanov had truly sought asylum or had been kidnapped. Eventually, they concluded that Shalamanov had indeed made a genuine attempt at asylum. This development was significant as it threatened to bring international attention to Bulgaria's assimilation campaigns against its Turkish population. A police chief in Kırcaali commented that while the mass emigration of Turks to Turkey might not draw extensive attention, Shalamanov's high-profile asylum case would indeed have a substantial impact (Trtspor, 2018). This situation illustrated the potent symbolic value of Shalamanov's actions in the broader context of political and ethnic tensions in Bulgaria. During this process, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vahit Melih Halefođlu, learned about Shalamanov's situation. Halefođlu informed Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal about Shalamanov's situation during the annual Cabinet meeting in Ankara (Odatv, 2019). Özal encouraged Halefođlu to address the

issue with his advisor, Can Pulak, and Turkish diplomat Selim Egeli (Türenç, 2020). Following lengthy negotiations, Turkish bureaucrats got in touch with the Turkish Embassies in Melbourne and Canberra, Australia, to advocate for the acceptance of Shalamanov's asylum application (Calgary Herald, 1986).

The process of transferring Shalamanov to Turkey necessitated an international agreement between Turkey and Australia. Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal delegated full responsibility to Turkish officials in Australia to oversee and facilitate Shalamanov's transfer to Turkey. Consequently, the Shalamanov case escalated into a matter of significant international concern for the Turkish government. Özal engaged directly with the Australian government to coordinate Shalamanov's safe passage to Turkey. Four days after Shalamanov's departure from the restaurant, Australian police came to Musa Sayan's residence, where Shalamanov was hiding, to assist with the legal formalities required for his departure from Australia and asylum request in Turkey (Odatv, 2019). Initially, the authorities confirmed that Shalamanov's decision to seek asylum was made voluntarily (Noble et al., 1986). They then escorted him to a hospital to verify that he had not experienced any physical harm or undue influence by those aiding his escape (Türenç, 2020). After ensuring all necessary arrangements were in place, the officials reassured Shalamanov that the Australian police were managing the situation (Taşpınar, 2019). Under the pact between the Turkish and Australian governments, Shalamanov received a temporary passport with an alternate identity for his overseas journeys. (Odatv, 2019). This development marked a crucial phase in Shalamanov's journey to asylum, involving diplomatic coordination at the highest levels between Turkey and Australia.

Shalamanov's secure international journey was overseen by Can Pulak, an advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal. The plan was for Shalamanov to fly immediately to London, stay overnight at the Turkish Embassy, and then proceed to Turkey on Prime Minister Özal's private jet (Neff, 1988b). He was escorted to Melbourne Airport by Australian authorities. Pulak advised that during the plane's stopover in Dubai, Shalamanov should remain on board to avoid any risk of capture by Bulgarian agents (Odatv, 2019). Upon arriving in London on December 12th, an official vehicle transported Shalamanov to the Turkish Embassy. He and Pulak spent a night there, during which Shalamanov had his first telephone conversation with Prime Minister Özal, who reassured him of his safe passage to Turkey (Trtspor, 2017). The following morning, with journalists gathered outside the Embassy and aware of Shalamanov's presence, a diversion was executed. The Embassy's chef, resembling Shalamanov, donned an oversized jacket, hat, and

sunglasses, and was driven out in an official vehicle, misleading the journalists. This diversion cleared the way for Shalamanov to discreetly leave the Embassy and head to London Heathrow Airport, where Prime Minister Özal's private jet awaited. The typical flight path from London to Ankara would have included flying over Bulgaria, so an alternative route was chosen. During the flight, Pulak briefed Shalamanov regarding their arrival at a military base in Ankara (Odatv, 2019). On December 13, 1986, the jet landed in Ankara, where Shalamanov was warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Özal and numerous journalists. This arrival marked Shalamanov's first chance to speak openly since his escape. He held a press conference, detailing his personal ordeal and exposing the Bulgarian government's assimilation ways. Shalamanov expressed his relief and gratitude for being in Turkey, and his intention to represent Turkey in international competitions, including the Olympics, while being a voice for oppressed Turks in Bulgaria (Türenç, 2020). Later on, Özal and Shalamanov formed a close bond, with the Prime Minister affectionately referring to Shalamanov as his "stepson" (Türkiye Gazetesi, 1988). This marked a new chapter in Shalamanov's life, symbolizing not only his personal freedom but also a significant diplomatic and humanitarian gesture by the Turkish government.

Post-Repatriation Political Processes

Exploring the tension between the Turkish and Bulgarian governments requires a concise examination of the policies of Turgut Özal, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey, especially regarding his domestic and international strategies. On November 6, 1983, Özal's Anavatan Partisi ascended to power in Turkey, with Özal assuming the role of Prime Minister, a position he maintained until 1989. Following this period, he was elected as President, serving from 1989 until 1993 (Daban, 2017). It is essential to acknowledge the context preceding Özal's assumption of office. In 1980, General Kenan Evren, the 17th Chief of the General Staff, staged a military coup against the Turkish government, leading to his presidency over the Turkish Republic until 1989. However, this period had adverse effects on Turkey's economy and its democratic institutions (Kurun, 2017). Upon assuming the role of Prime Minister, Özal swiftly turned his attention to the formidable economic challenges confronting Turkey. During his first public address in 1983, Özal highlighted the critical economic challenges Turkey faced and expressed concern over the weakening state of its democracy. He also articulated his ambition to foster amicable and peaceful diplomatic ties with Turkey's neighbors, notably Bulgaria and Greece. However, at an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meeting in Stockholm, Özal openly criticized the Bulgarian government. He urged President Jivkov to cease the assimilation efforts targeting the Turkish minority in Bulgaria (Daban, 2017). This

critique underscored a broader concern for the rights of Turks abroad, particularly during an adverse period when a considerable number of Turks residing in Bulgaria sought refuge not only in Turkey but also in Western Europe, particularly in Austria, Germany, and Sweden. Additionally, a significant number of Turks found asylum in Australia (Maeva, 2008), Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Hillgren, 2009). It is believed that these host countries, which have permitted the asylum requests of Turks, have provided support in response to the existing circumstances, reflecting a period of geopolitical tension and humanitarian concern that intersected with Özal's tenure and policy priorities.

On December 15, 1986, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM), utilizing Articles 6 and 7 of Law No. 403 on Turkish Citizenship, bestowed Turkish nationality on Naum Shalamanov, who thereafter adopted the name Naim Süleymanoğlu (Türenç, 2020). The year marked a pivotal moment in Süleymanoğlu's sporting career, igniting significant diplomatic tensions. The issues of "national identity" and "weightlifting license" for Süleymanoğlu surfaced as contentious points between the governments of Turkey and Bulgaria. High-profile figures, including Juan Antonio Samaranch of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal, Bulgarian President Todor Jivkov, Arif Nusret Say of the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF), Christo Meranzov of the Bulgarian Weightlifting Federation (BWF), and Gottfried Schödl of the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), were involved in extensive negotiations to resolve Süleymanoğlu's eligibility and status as an athlete. The initial move was made by Arif Nusret Say, who reached out to Christo Meranzov to deliberate on Süleymanoğlu's potential representation of Turkey in international arenas. Meranzov contended that, according to BWF's records, Süleymanoğlu was still regarded as Bulgarian and had been taken to Turkey involuntarily (Türkileri, 1997). These early talks saw limited progress. As per IWF's guidelines, in a scenario where weightlifters emigrate or defect, they are barred from international competition for a minimum of one year (Porter & Slee, 1986). This stipulation meant Süleymanoğlu could not represent Turkey until December 1987 (Neff, 1988b). Furthermore, in the absence of a consensus between the IWF and IOC, this suspension could be extended to three years for athletes aiming to compete in the Olympics, thereby delaying Süleymanoğlu's potential participation for Turkey until the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games (Neff, 1988b; Bayındır, 2018).

On March 12, 1987, at the International Weightlifting Federation's (IWF) yearly gathering in Athens, Turkish and Bulgarian representatives met to deliberate on the Naim Süleymanoğlu

affair (Milliyet, 1987). IWF President Gottfried Schödl was in attendance as well. The Bulgarian delegation refused to sanction Süleymanoğlu's switch, claiming he had been kidnapped in Melbourne and coerced into representing Turkey. Conversely, the Turkish side contended that Süleymanoğlu had voluntarily and independently chosen to defect to Turkey (Milliyet, 1987b). After prolonged negotiations lasting four and a half hours, a compromise was reached that appeased both the IWF and the International Olympic Committee (IOC): Süleymanoğlu was barred from competing in international events for one year, with the exception of the Olympic Games. The outcome of the meeting was conveyed to Süleymanoğlu by Reha Muhtar, a journalist from the Milliyet newspaper.

As a result of the International Weightlifting Federation's (IWF) ruling, Naim Süleymanoğlu was precluded from representing Turkey at the 1987 European Championships and the World Championships the same year. Süleymanoğlu's primary ambition was to compete in the Olympic Games. IWF President Gottfried Schödl was a fervent advocate for Süleymanoğlu and was vocal about his anticipation of Süleymanoğlu's involvement in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (Türkileri, 1997). Demonstrating his support, Schödl made a point to visit Süleymanoğlu during an early 1988 local weightlifting competition in Antalya.

The 1988 European Weightlifting Championships in Cardiff, Wales, became a pivotal moment for addressing the issue surrounding Naim Süleymanoğlu. At this event, IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch called for a gathering with the Bulgarian Olympic Committee (BOC) and the Turkish delegation, aiming to amicably settle Süleymanoğlu's situation ahead of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (Taşpınar, 2019). Before the meeting in Cardiff, Samaranch had visited Süleymanoğlu in Istanbul, reaffirming his support for Süleymanoğlu's desire to compete for Turkey in Seoul (Trtavaz, 2017). The meeting in Cardiff saw the participation of Samaranch, BWF President Christo Meranzov, TWF President Arif Nusret Say, and Kemal Kamiloğlu, Turkey's Director General of Sports. The discussions appeared to be nearing a successful conclusion when a financial disagreement arose, with the Bulgarian side demanding \$2.5 million from Turkey as compensation (Bayındır, 2018). This issue momentarily stalled the negotiation process. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian and Turkish representatives agreed to convene again in Sofia to continue their discussions (Neff, 1988a). Furthermore, Meranzov requested a personally signed letter from Süleymanoğlu, detailing the events leading up to his departure from Bulgaria, to formally document his account of the circumstances.

The 1988 European Weightlifting Championships in Cardiff marked a historic moment for Turkey, as Naim Süleymanoğlu's participation led to the country's first-ever international gold medal in weightlifting. During the championship's press conference, Süleymanoğlu conveyed his sentiments with the following statement:

Throughout the tournament, my thoughts were with the 50 million Turks residing in Turkey and the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. After fleeing Bulgaria for asylum in Turkey, I devoted myself to hard work. I am satisfied being in Turkey, with my only wish being to stay close to my family. The authorities in Bulgaria altered my name and inflicted suffering and abuse on ethnic Turks. This forced name change made it impossible for me to remain in Bulgaria or to continue my career in weightlifting, leading me to seek refuge. Despite Bulgarian media suggesting otherwise, I am genuinely content in Turkey. It brings me immense joy to have exposed the Bulgarian government's policies of assimilating ethnic Turks. Finding safety and peace in Turkey represents the ultimate joy for me. (Türenç, 2020).

On May 4, 1988, Turkey's Director General of Sports, Kemal Kamiloğlu, and the President of the Turkish Weightlifting Federation, Arif Nusret Say, traveled to Sofia to negotiate with the Bulgarian delegation to resolve Süleymanoğlu's case (Türenç, 2020). Following an extensive negotiation process (Trtavaz, 2017), an undisclosed payment, estimated at varying amounts by different documented sources, was made to Bulgarian officials to secure Süleymanoğlu's weightlifting license for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. Neither the Bulgarian nor Turkish governments officially disclosed the amount of the payment, leading to discrepancies among documented sources regarding the sum. For instance, Alfano stated that the amount was \$1,500,000 (Bayındır, 2018), while Türkileri (1997) reported it as \$1,070,000. The Turkish National Olympic Committee (2020) stated it was \$1,000,000. Prime Minister Turgut Özal played an active role in the payment for Süleymanoğlu's "license" (Hürmeriç Altunsöz & Kocak, 2017). Özal ensured that the payment was covered by Turkish National Resources (Taşpınar, 2019). The transaction did not follow standard banking procedures. Turkish officials met Bulgarian counterparts at the Kapıkule Border Gate, the border between Turkey and Bulgaria, and delivered the payment in suitcases containing cash. Özal faced criticism from Turkish media and politicians in his subsequent political career for using national resources to "rescue" Süleymanoğlu. In response, Özal highlighted Süleymanoğlu's impact on introducing Turkish society to the world, promoting weightlifting in Turkey among young people, and encouraging Turkish Bulgarians to migrate to Turkey (Bayındır, 2018). It's worth noting that at that time, Süleymanoğlu's family was not allowed to leave Bulgaria (Neff, 1988a). With substantial support

and efforts from Özal, Süleymanoğlu's family was eventually able to migrate to Turkey at the end of 1988.

After delivering an exceptional performance and winning the gold medal at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, Süleymanoğlu became the center of international media attention. During a press conference held in Seoul, he expressed the following:

"Victory has always brought me immense joy, especially when it contributes to my nation's pride. Such achievements fill me with happiness and pride. Up until the moment my name was forcibly changed, the thought of departing Bulgaria had never crossed my mind. My desire was to defend my identity. In Bulgaria, a million people had their names altered, and I was one of them. It's been two years since I last saw my family, a separation that deeply saddens me. I earnestly appeal to, indeed insist that the Bulgarian officials permit my family's arrival in Turkey." (The Herald News, 1988).

Following that, an interview was conducted with journalist Peter Alfano from The New York Times. Süleymanoğlu made the following statement:

Ethnic Turks face significant prejudice, being denied the right to practice their Muslim faith, speak their native tongue, or engage in their cultural traditions. The most recent affront came when the Bulgarian government assigned me a new identity, Naum Shalamanov. It's challenging to articulate, but a person's name is intrinsically linked to their essence and reputation. I was stripped of my identity and reduced to feeling like an anonymous entity, almost as if I had been assigned a mere number instead of a name (Alfano, 1988b).

Likewise, Christine Brennan from The Washington Post published an article discussing Süleymanoğlu's impact on the Turks in Bulgaria. In her article, she wrote the following:

Süleymanoğlu's triumph at the 1988 Seoul Olympics delivered Turkey's first Olympic gold in two decades, sparking joy among Turks globally. In essence, Süleymanoğlu, celebrated as an athletic champion, swiftly emerged as an emblem for the over 900,000 ethnic Turks, akin to himself, who endured discriminatory policies by the Bulgarian regime. (Brennan, 1988).

In the latter part of 1988, Süleymanoğlu was extended an invitation to the United States for a meeting with Richard Shifter, the then Deputy Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs (1985-1992), to deliberate on the issue of forced assimilation or 'Bulgarization'. After this meeting, American officials declared their backing for Turkey and pledged to pursue a "migration agreement" with Bulgaria, aimed at facilitating the unimpeded

migration of Turks to Turkey, as reported by Milliyet in 1988. The report on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs indicated that the Turkish community was experiencing coercion from the Bulgarian authorities (Kamil, 1989). Süleymanoğlu was notably active in Washington, D.C., receiving an invitation to the White House from President Ronald Reagan and giving a speech at the United Nations headquarters in New York. Alfano (1988b) documented Süleymanoğlu's address in this context:

In 1984, the Bulgarian government launched a policy that infringed upon the rights of its Turkish minority, who made up about 20% of the country's population, prohibiting them from speaking Turkish, practicing Islam, or engaging in their cultural traditions. The authorities imposed new names on Turkish individuals as part of this policy. To enforce these measures, the government deployed tanks, armed forces, police, and military personnel, alongside imposing harsh fines and sentences of imprisonment.

After the exposure of Bulgaria's oppressive practices against the Turkish minority, several prominent human rights organizations-initiated inquiries into the country's forced assimilation efforts as part of broader allegations of human rights abuses. These organizations included the Helsinki Human Rights Monitoring Organization, based in the United States, Amnesty International, headquartered in London, UK, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), located in Vienna, Austria.

In May 1989, Bulgarian President Jivkov was compelled to make a speech through local media channels, introducing a new approach to Bulgaria's migration policies. The key elements were as follows:

Bulgarian nationals have the freedom to exit Bulgaria at their discretion, with every citizen entitled to exercise their migration rights free from any conditions. For individuals who embraced Islam during the period of Ottoman rule, Bulgaria remains their homeland. I (Jivkov) am of the conviction that authentic Bulgarians will persist in inhabiting these territories. My message is directed towards Turkish authorities: please open your borders to Muslim Bulgarians (ethnic Turks), whether for temporary or permanent resettlement. It is incumbent upon Turkey to facilitate this openness in alignment with international treaties (Atasoy, 2007).

Jivkov's speech serves as an illustration of the Bulgarian government's efforts to mitigate international scrutiny by personally addressing the situation and the policy of forced assimilation, known as the Bulgarization Project. Following Jivkov's address, Prime Minister Turgut Özal reached out to Süleymanoğlu to inquire whether the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria would be interested

in relocating to Turkey. Subsequently, during a NATO meeting in Brussels, Özal declared that Turkey would open its borders to the ethnic Turks from Bulgaria, signaling a significant policy shift in response to the situation (Milliyet, 1989b).

The migration from Bulgaria to Turkey in 1989 contributed to the end of the communist regime in Bulgaria. On November 10, 1989, the Bulgarian communist regime was toppled in a coup led by key figures within the government: General Dobri Dzhrov, the Minister of Defense; Georgi Antanasov, the Prime Minister; Andrei Lukanov, the Minister of Economic Relations; and Petar Mladenov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. This marked the end of Todor Jivkov's thirty-five-year dictatorship. Jivkov, who had served as the General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the head of state, was ousted. Petar Mladenov, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, ascended to power, taking over the presidency of Bulgaria until 1990, effectively closing a significant chapter in Bulgarian political history (Köksal & Gül, 2013).

Following the disintegration of the Communist Party in Bulgaria towards the end of 1989, the Bulgarian government made several declarations and recognitions aimed at mending and enhancing ties with the Turkish minority that remained in Bulgaria (Eminov, 1997). Initially, under Petar Mladenov's leadership, the government accepted accountability for its past conduct, admitting to the implementation of harmful assimilation practices. Furthermore, the government authorized the Turkish population to restore their original names, marking a significant step towards reconciliation and respect for their cultural and personal identities.

Acknowledging its actions as a significant political error, the government proclaimed that moving forward, the cultural and civil rights of all citizens would be steadfastly guaranteed and safeguarded. In a more detailed commitment, it was declared that Turks and other Muslims would have the right to revert to their Turkish-Muslim names. They would also be allowed to freely practice their religion devoid of governmental obstruction. Furthermore, the Turkish language could be freely spoken, and education in Turkish would be reintroduced in municipal schools within ethnically diverse regions, reflecting a comprehensive effort to rectify past injustices (Eminov, 1997).

The remarkable gold medal victories of Naim Süleymanoğlu at the Seoul (1988), Barcelona (1992), and Atlanta (1996) Summer Olympics, alongside his accomplishments in numerous international events, ignited a wave of inspiration among the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, compelling many to emigrate. One notable example is Halil Mutlu, originally from Kircaali, who was deeply influenced by Süleymanoğlu's career trajectory. Süleymanoğlu's triumph at the 1982

World Junior Championships in Sao Paulo, Brazil, particularly stood out to Mutlu, positioning Süleymanoğlu as a towering figure and role model within the Turkish community in Bulgaria. Motivated by Süleymanoğlu's success, Mutlu took up weightlifting in Bulgaria (Trtavaz, 2017). His career later flourished, leading to the shattering of over twenty world records and securing three consecutive Olympic gold medals (Turkish Weightlifting Federation, 2020). This instance underscores the profound influence Naim Süleymanoğlu had in motivating athletes of Turkish descent to pursue greatness in sports (Türkileri, 1997).

Political Entry Attempts

Süleymanoğlu briefly stepped away from his weightlifting career due to a growing interest in Turkish politics. His first attempt to enter politics was in 1999 during the general elections in Turkey. He ran as an independent candidate to represent the Bursa constituency in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. His choice of Bursa was influenced by the fact that many Turks who had migrated from Bulgaria to Turkey during the 1989 exodus had settled in Bursa. However, the election results did not favor Süleymanoğlu, and he was not elected (Hürriyet, 1999).

In 2004, during the local elections in Turkey, Naim Süleymanoğlu made his second bid for political office, this time aligning himself with the Nationalist Movement Party in hopes of securing the mayoral seat for Kırac district, part of Büyükçekmece in Istanbul, moving away from his previous independent candidacy (Demirbilek, 2004). Despite his efforts, Süleymanoğlu's political aspirations were not realized, as he was unsuccessful in this venture (Hürriyet, 2004). He didn't fare better in the 2007 general elections, where he once again stood for the same party (Habertürk, 2007), but to no avail. Despite his strong desire and multiple attempts to enter the Turkish parliament, Süleymanoğlu's political pursuits did not lead to an active role in the country's politics.

His Illness and Death

In 2009, Naim Süleymanoğlu was admitted to a hospital in Istanbul following a seizure. During his stay in intensive care, he was diagnosed with a buildup of fluid in his liver. Hasan Akkuş, the President of the Turkish Weightlifting Federation (TWF) at the time, reported that Süleymanoğlu's health was on the mend (Hebepci, 2009). Süleymanoğlu was soon discharged, but his liver condition worsened over the years. By late 2017, he was hospitalized again due to liver failure resulting from cirrhosis, necessitating an immediate liver transplant (Sandomir, 2017). A suitable donor was found, and on October 6, 2017, Dr. Kâmil Yalçın Polat and his team performed the transplant surgery (Cumhuriyet, 2017). The support from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

the President of the Republic of Turkey, was noteworthy, especially his visit to Süleymanoğlu in the hospital. After the surgery, Süleymanoğlu faced complications, including increased fluid retention, and remained in intensive care for more than a month (Arizona Daily Sun, 2017). Scheduled for a second operation to address a brain hemorrhage, Süleymanoğlu passed away unexpectedly on November 18, 2017. The following day, his funeral took place at the Istanbul Edirnekapı Martyrs' Cemetery after prayers at the Istanbul Fatih Mosque, attended by media, sports figures from home and abroad, and Turkish political figures. Valerios Leonidis, his friend and legendary rival, was among the attendees and made a poignant statement in his honor.

He was unparalleled in the world of weightlifting, a singular presence unmatched on this earth. The likelihood of another like Süleymanoğlu gracing our world seems incredibly slim. He transcended the role of a competitor; he was a genuine friend. Today marks a sorrowful occasion, not just for me but for the entire weightlifting fraternity and the broader realm of sports. Süleymanoğlu was my idol as I embarked on my weightlifting journey. Having the opportunity to know him and compete alongside him was a privilege. He pushed me to elevate my performance. I'm convinced that there will never be another to match him; he stands as the preeminent weightlifter of our era. His passing is a loss that weighs heavily on all of us, and his memory will forever be cherished in our hearts.

CONCLUSION

The life and legacy of Naim Süleymanoğlu, extending well beyond the confines of weightlifting, presents a compelling narrative rich in political symbolism and cultural resonance. His evolution from a Bulgarian weightlifting prodigy to a Turkish Olympic icon mirrors the complex interplay between personal achievement and socio-political circumstances. Süleymanoğlu's resistance against Bulgaria's oppressive assimilation policies and his subsequent asylum in Turkey transformed him from an athletic champion into a symbol of defiance and a representation of national identity.

Süleymanoğlu's journey highlights the multifaceted role of athletes in shaping national and international dialogues. His experiences serve as a vivid illustration of how sports can become a platform for political expression and a means of preserving cultural identity, especially for marginalized communities. Through his stand against cultural erasure and his commitment to his ethnic roots, Süleymanoğlu transcends the traditional role of an athlete, reflecting the power of sports to challenge and redefine societal norms.

Analytically, Süleymanoğlu's life story is a testament to the influential role of sports in international diplomacy. His Olympic triumphs were significant not just for their athletic merit but also for their geopolitical implications. These victories demonstrated the ability of individual athletes to sway national pride, influence international perception, and impact political discourse. His life exemplifies the capacity of sports to serve as a medium for political dissent and a reflection of broader struggles for cultural and political autonomy.

Moreover, Süleymanoğlu's influence is profoundly felt in his role as a trailblazer and a source of inspiration for future generations. His legacy is cemented not solely by his record-breaking performances but also by his role as a catalyst for change and an emblem of ethnic pride. This is evident in the number of athletes who followed his path from Bulgaria to Turkey, seeking both athletic acclaim and a stage for cultural expression.

In conclusion, the narrative of Naim Süleymanoğlu is emblematic of the deep connections between sports, politics, and cultural identity. His life underscores the power of sports as a tool for political and cultural advocacy, breaking the conventional boundaries of athletics. Süleymanoğlu's legacy endures as a powerful reminder of the potential of athletes to shape socio-political landscapes and champion cultural and ethnic identities in the face of widespread systemic challenges. His story is a poignant reflection of resilience, identity, and the enduring influence of sports as a vehicle for social and political engagement.

Ethics Statement

For this study, the necessary ethical permissions were obtained from the Ethics Committee of Ataturk University Faculty of Sport Sciences (Issue/Decision Number: E-70400699-000-2300418653, Dated: 26.12.2023).

Author Contributions

Within the scope of the study, the authors have equal contributions.

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