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The Indelible Scars: The Story of the Bulgarian Turks and Their Flight to a New Life

They are called "Bulgaristan Türkleri" (Turks from Bulgaria) or "Bulgaristan Göçmenleri" (Immigrants from Bulgaria). Behind these names lies a community with a deep, centuries-old history in the Balkans, but also a story of oppression, forced assimilation, and a heart-wrenching flight that scattered hundreds of thousands of people across Turkey and Europe. Their history is a testament to resilience and the desire to preserve one's identity against a backdrop of political tyranny.

The "Revival Process": A Campaign to Erase an Identity

The Turkish minority in Bulgaria, a remnant of the Ottoman Empire, lived for generations in relative peace alongside the Bulgarian majority. This changed dramatically in the 1980s under the communist regime of Todor Zhivkov. In a nationalistic frenzy, the government launched a brutal assimilation campaign that would go down in history as the "Revival Process" (Възродителен процес). The goal was to completely erase the Turkish identity and create a homogeneous Bulgarian nation.

Turkish names were forcibly replaced with Slavic ones. Speaking Turkish in public was forbidden. Islamic traditions, such as circumcision and traditional burials, were outlawed. Mosques were closed, and Qurans were confiscated. Those who resisted faced intimidation, imprisonment, deportation to labor camps, or even death. Overnight, the community was stripped of its most fundamental rights: its name, its language, and its faith.

The Great Exodus of 1989: A Flight for Life

Tensions reached a boiling point in May 1989, when peaceful protests by the Turkish community were violently suppressed. In an attempt to get rid of the "troublesome" minority, the regime suddenly opened the border with Turkey. What followed was the largest ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II.

Within just three months, more than 360,000 Bulgarian Turks were expelled or forced to flee the country. The escape was a traumatic experience. Families were often given only a few hours to pack their belongings. They had to leave their homes, their land, and sometimes even family members behind. With only a few possessions in suitcases and bags, they waited in line at the border for days, uncertain of what the future would hold. Many sold their properties for a fraction of their value or simply left everything behind. The images of overcrowded trains and cars at the Kapıkule border crossing are etched into the community's collective memory. It was a journey filled with fear, sorrow, and the loss of a homeland.

A New Home in Turkey and Europe

The majority of the refugees found a new home in Turkey, the "anavatan" (motherland). The Turkish government set up reception camps, but integration was not always easy. Despite

their Turkish origins, they were sometimes viewed with suspicion and called "Bulgarians." They had to start from scratch, building a new life in a country that was unfamiliar to many.

Today, the descendants of these immigrants form a significant part of the population in several Turkish cities.

- **Bursa:** This city is often called the "heart" of the Bulgarian Turks in Turkey. The city already had historical ties and offered employment opportunities in the textile and automotive industries. Neighborhoods like Görükle and Hürriyet are known for their large populations of "göçmenler."
- **Istanbul:** As a metropolis, Istanbul attracted many due to its economic opportunities. Large communities have settled, especially in districts like Avcılar, Bayrampaşa, and Kartal.
- **İzmir:** The Aegean coastal city of İzmir also became an important destination, where immigrants integrated into the diverse urban society.

In addition to Turkey, a significant number of Bulgarian Turks, especially after the fall of communism and Bulgaria's accession to the EU, have built lives in Western Europe. Countries like **Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden** now host vibrant communities. For them, the Bulgarian EU passport offers the freedom to travel and work wherever they choose—a freedom that was brutally taken from their parents.

The Bulgarian Turks and their descendants carry the scars of the past, but they also show enormous resilience. Their story is a powerful reminder of the devastating consequences of nationalism and intolerance, but also of the indestructible will to preserve one's own culture and identity, wherever they are in the world.