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Floating to Freedom

How much is freedom worth?

- Jeremiah Jacques
- [21-10-2019](#)

Günter Wetzel was 22 years old when he decided he had to risk everything to try to free his family. It was 1978, and he lived with his wife, Petra, and their two small children in the German Democratic Republic, often called East Germany.

(Listen to The Sun Also Rises episode featuring this interview and astounding story):

In West Germany, the influence of the United States, Britain and France helped create economic opportunity and personal and political freedom. But East Germany was controlled by the Soviet Union. It was neither democratic nor a republic. In reality, the Soviet government seized control of every important aspect of a person's daily life.

The result: a nation where incomes were paltry, foods and products were scarce and available only on occasion after waiting in lines for hours. Secret police surveilled and recorded people. Friends and neighbors were enticed to report anyone who voiced negative opinions of the government. Children were coaxed to betray their parents. Many were sent to prison, labor camps, or worse.

As East Germany plodded through the 1970s, the economy deteriorated, political tensions rose, and existence grew more and more bleak. "It started early in our childhood, with the dissatisfaction we sensed in our parents," Wetzel told the *Trumpet*. "Then our own experiences in adulthood only increased our dissatisfaction."

Someone under such oppression would naturally seek greener pastures elsewhere. But it was illegal for East Germans to

leave, and the government built walls, fences and guard posts, stretching 860 miles from the Baltic Sea down to what was then Czechoslovakia, to lock them in. Some 50,000 guards manned the border around the clock. The Ministry for State Security, known as the Stasi, gave these guards simple orders regarding anyone attempting escape: shoot to kill. Many who somehow evaded the guards were then slain by land mines and other automatically triggered weapons. Hundreds died trying to cross.

"In the GDR," Wetzel said, "one was basically imprisoned."

An Idea Floats In

Since the birth of his first child in 1973, Wetzel had tried to think of a way to get past the border guards and the miles of razor wire-topped walls to bring his young family to freedom. One day in early 1978, he was looking at a magazine his sister-in-law had smuggled in from West Germany. There was an article about the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. His eyes widened at the photos. "That's when I thought: 'Building such a balloon can't be too terribly hard! We can do this!'"

Wetzel was handy and enjoyed puzzling out mechanical problems, but he had no technical knowledge about safe fuel mixtures, heavy-duty sewing, airproofing fabric, the principles of convection, or building and safely operating burners.

Still, Wetzel was determined to learn and to at least attempt an escape into West Germany. Soon after arriving at this conclusion, he spoke with his friend Peter Strelzyk. The two men determined to escape, with all four Wetzels and all four Strelzyks.

Both men had full-time jobs. Directly after work each day, they would rush home to continue building the balloon. Designing, cutting, sewing and welding often lasted late into the night.

For the balloon's envelope, they used lining-fabric for leatherwear since it was readily available in their town of Pößneck. They stitched it together with Wetzel's mother-in-law's foot-powered Gritzner antique sewing machine.

"I took a section of stove pipe," Wetzel wrote on his blog, BallonFlucht.de, "connected it to a gas cylinder, turned it on and held a match to it." He was delighted to see the flame burn cleanly and that he could adjust its size—and the altitude of the balloon—with a cylinder valve.

Most hot air balloons use woven baskets because they are light and strong. But since Wetzel and Strelzyk didn't have access to such materials, they welded old pieces of angle steel together to make a basket 4-and-1/2-feet square, in which they would need to cram both families.

Expensive Experience

Seven weeks after Wetzel had seen the hot air balloon article, it was time for a test. After midnight, they drove to a small forest clearing and got to work. But they discovered that the burner's warm air was escaping through the fabric of the balloon.

After spending days soaking the envelope with an air-proofing chemical, they realized that even if they successfully trapped air inside it, the balloon wasn't large or robust enough to transport the eight people. "The first one was too weak and small; everything was wrong with it," Wetzel said. "But that's how we gained experience."

They burned the failed balloon in Strelzyk's boiler to destroy all trace of it, and started building a second—this one larger and made of taffeta instead of lining-fabric. Wetzel bought a small motor and built it onto the sewing machine to speed the stitching. Within six weeks, they had a new, larger balloon—about 70,000 cubic feet—ready to test. But another late-night test showed that they were unable to channel the warm air through the envelope's opening.

"Once again I had an idea," Wetzel wrote. "I attached the engine from my motorcycle, a 250cc MZ with an output of 14 horsepower."

He attached a car muffler to make the engine quieter and, thanks to the blower, the next test was a success. "Words can hardly describe what we felt in this moment," Wetzel wrote. "We were simply overwhelmed by the spectacle before us. We walked around the balloon and were certain that this glowing ball of fire would bring us to the West."

Yet questions remained about the burner's reliability and the envelope's size. Günter and Petra began developing serious doubts about the balloon's safety, and became terrified of the possibility of getting caught. "They would have put us adults into prisons," Wetzel said. "And our children would have been placed into children's home."

The Stasi gave guards simple orders regarding anyone attempting escape: shoot to kill. Many who evaded the guards were slain by land mines. Hundreds died trying to cross.

With heavy hearts, the Wetzels withdrew from the escape plan.

More than a year later, July 3, 1979, the Strelzyks attempted to escape in the second balloon. They got aboard and lifted off. But they were forced to make an emergency landing—short of the border. They had to flee the crash site. The Stasi soon found the balloon and published notices seeking information on its makers.

The Wetzels, worried by balloon-related purchases they had made the year before, felt that staying in East Germany would mean surely being caught. So they worked with the Strelzyks once again on a third balloon—this one almost twice as large as the second. Feeling the Stasi on their trail filled them with unprecedented urgency.

“We were also acutely aware that it would not be as easy this time to acquire the materials,” Wetzel wrote. “[W]e feared that the shops selling the material would need to report large purchases.” So they purchased the fabric just a few dozen square feet at a time, from various shops all over East Germany. After buying more taffeta than they felt was safe, they switched to bed sheets and curtains.

Risking Everything

On a rainy day on Sept. 15, 1979, as the winds blew northward, Wetzel was on the home stretch of sewing the third balloon. As evening approached, the weather conditions began to change. “The winds shifted,” he said, “and it stopped raining.”

The conditions were suddenly perfect to attempt floating the families to freedom. “That motivated me to speed up my work with the sewing,” Wetzel said, “and I was finished at around 10 o’clock in the evening.”

Shortly after midnight, they stuffed the balloon into a small trailer behind the Strelzyk’s car. The two families stood in the Wetzel’s kitchen. The adults sipped coffee with shaking hands and looked at their children. If successful, all the material comforts they had worked their whole lives to accumulate would be left behind, and they may never again see their other family members and friends. If unsuccessful, they could be killed in a fiery crash—or imprisoned, with the children made wards of the corrupt state. The stakes were sky-high.

Around 1 a.m., they arrived at a clearing in the forest somewhere between Oberlemnitz and Heinersdorf. For half an hour they sat silently, making sure no one had followed them. Then they began, laying the balloon out flat and fastening the metal basket onto it with the ropes. They anchored the basket to the ground with four ropes, each tied to a large iron spike sunken into the earth.

Wetzel fired up the blower, the sound shattering the heavy forest silence. Strelzyk ignited the burner and shot the flame into the opening, rapidly heating the air. Minutes later, the balloon was fully inflated: 60 feet wide and 75 feet-high, made of taffeta, curtains and bedsheets of every color.

Petra grabbed their sleeping 2-year-old son from the car, and the eight people crammed into the tiny basket.

At 2:32 a.m., Wetzel and Strelzyk cut the anchor ropes. They lifted into the silent darkness.

“We soon soared up to an altitude of about 6,500 feet,” Wetzel said. This height—more than a mile up—was later confirmed by an ornithological station that spotted the balloon on its radar.

The men expected to see the border wall beneath them, but there was no sign of it. Since the balloon had spun several times during its ascent, they flew entirely at the mercy of the wind, and unsure of which direction they were traveling.

After 23 minutes, the burner sputtered out its last fumes of fuel and the flame flickered out. The balloon began losing altitude—first slowly, and then at terrifying speeds.

Free at Last, or Captive Still?

They slammed onto the ground. “It was a hard landing,” Wetzel said, “but we landed on some shrubs, which might have softened it a little bit.”

They were jarred and bruised, but no one was badly injured. They looked around, unsure of their location. Had they made it? Or were they still in the GDR, where the Stasi might descend upon them at any second?

They began running, searching for a clue of their whereabouts. Finally Wetzel noticed a telling detail. “It was a clear night, and I recognized that the fields which we passed by were rather small,” Wetzel said. In East Germany, the farms were government-run, and the fields were huge. It was a promising sign.

But they kept running. “We came to a farm and saw a machine of the type Fendt,” Wetzel said. “We didn’t have those in the GDR so we knew then that we were in the West!”

They had floated over the border wall, over the Stasi, over the armed guards, and over the minefields.

They were on West German soil. They were free.

A Bleak Microcosm

An almost entirely unknown truth is that, on a spiritual level, nearly everyone on Earth is in a situation similar to that of the Wetzels and Strelzyks.

In his book [Mystery of the Ages](#), the late Herbert W. Armstrong wrote, “For almost 6,000 years a civilization has developed, which we call the world. But it has been a world held captive.”

Mr. Armstrong’s understanding of this staggering truth came from the Bible. 2 Corinthians 4:4 states that the “god of this world” is not the Creator God, but Satan. John 12:31 designates “the prince” of the Earth as Satan. Revelation 12:9 reveals that Satan “deceiveth the whole world.” “It has become Satan’s world, though millions have been deceived into believing it is God’s world,” Mr. Armstrong continued. “To this day, Satan is still on that throne.”

The Bible shows in such scriptures as John 6:44 that, at this early phase in His plan, God chooses to free some people from Satan’s captivity—but only a fraction of a percent of people. The overwhelming majority of the world today is not free. Even the democratic nations that profess to be free are being held spiritually captive.

And these scriptures show that the captor is a being far more oppressive than the Stasi or East German leaders. So how can a person be liberated?

The Truth Shall Make You Free

In John 8:28-29, Jesus Christ revealed an astounding truth: “... I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. ... I do always those things that please him.”

Christ makes clear here that He doesn’t do anything of His own volition. Instead He only follows His Father’s will and does what pleases His Father. Many would say such a mentality lacks freedom. *That’s the mindset of a slave! If you’re a free person, you will do what pleases you!*

But Christ disagrees with that reasoning: “... If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE” (verses 31-32).

To “continue in [Christ’s] word,” a person must understand the truth of God. Only understanding and living by this precious truth—which comes from God’s intervention in a person’s life—can float a person out of spiritual deception and to freedom. Anything else is not real liberty.

Christ concluded His discussion of true freedom in verse 36: “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

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