

# THE PROTAGONISTS

## A MAGAZINE ARTICLE ...

Günter Wetzel was one of the thousands upon thousands of Germans who were left isolated from the rest of the world in the GDR when the wall was built. He lived with his family in Pössneck, a small town in East Germany, 12 miles from the border with the West. He made a decent living as a builder.

## TWO FRIENDS

In 1978, Wetzel's sister-in-law who lived in the West came to visit. Among other things, she brought along an old magazine with a feature on a hot-air balloon festival in the United States.

Günter Wetzel shared the article with his friend Peter Strelzyk, an electrician and former air force mechanic. Together, the two men came up with an idea ...

**GÜNTER AND PETER SET ABOUT BUILDING A HOT-AIR BALLOON TO ESCAPE WITH THEIR FAMILIES**

## DESIGNING IT

Before starting to build the hot-air balloon, the two men studied library books on mechanics, engineering, and physics. Both were skilled tinkers and felt perfectly capable of taking on the challenge they had set themselves.

## TWO FAMILIES—EIGHT FUGITIVES

Günter and Petra Wetzel had two young children: Peter, age 5, and Andreas, just 2 years old. Peter Strelzyk and his wife, Doris, also had two children, albeit slightly older: Frank was 15, and Andreas 11 years old.

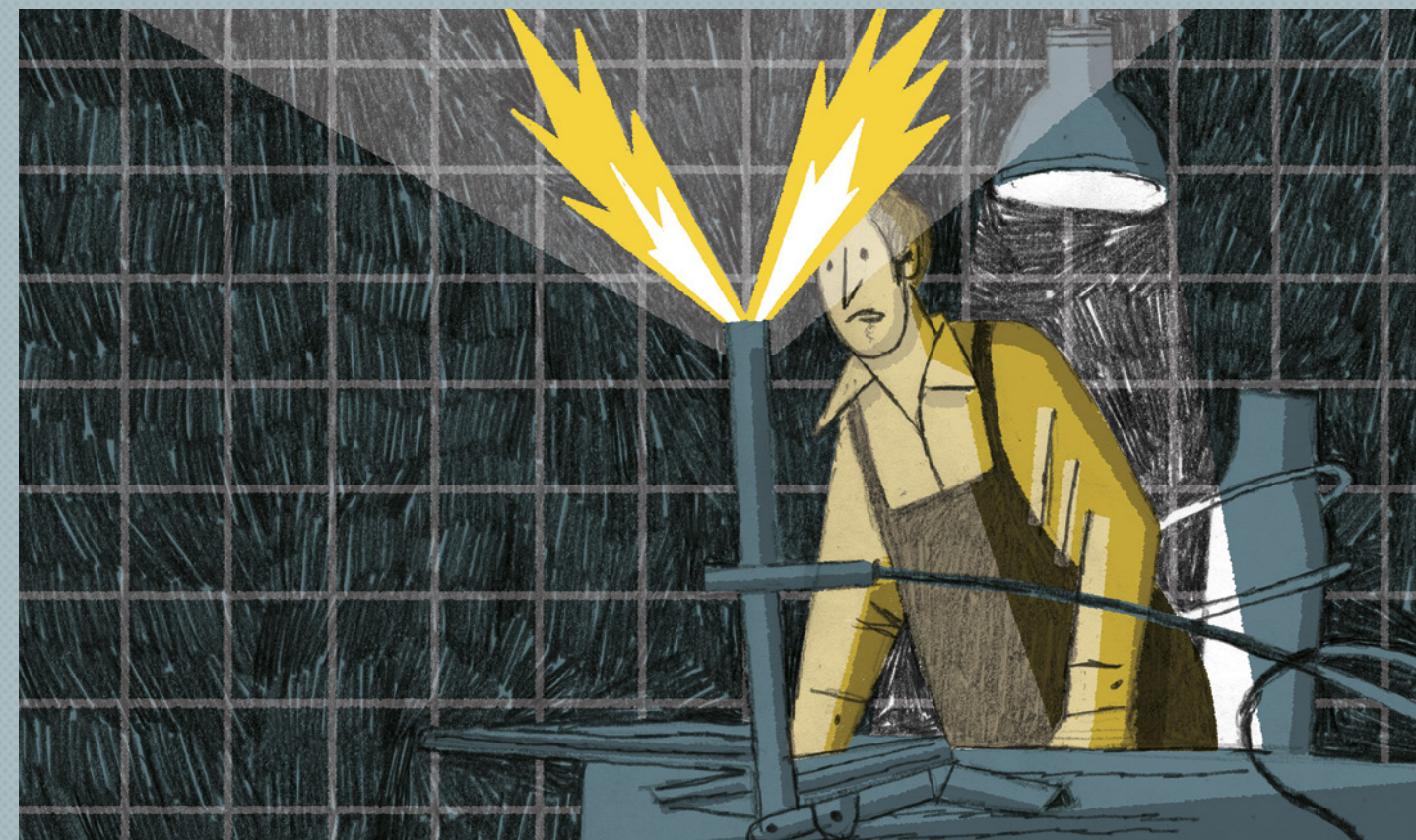


**LIKE OTHER CITIZENS OF EAST GERMANY, PETER AND GÜNTER HAD OFTEN DISCUSSED ESCAPING THEIR COUNTRY BUT COULD NEVER WORK OUT HOW—UNTIL THEY CAME UP WITH THE BALLOON IDEA**

## THE RISK OF BEING FOUND OUT

The situation in the GDR at the time was very complicated. Many people in East Germany spied on their neighbors, friends, and even family members and informed the authorities. It was virtually impossible to know for certain whom one could trust.

Yet both Peter's wife (Doris) and Günter's (Petra) agreed to the plan, and both families started working in their basement. The entire operation had to remain top secret.



# MAKING THE HOT-AIR BALLOON

## LET'S DO THIS

Once they had worked out the balloon's design, the men set out to find the right material to build it.

The two families bought their fabrics and other parts they needed at a number of different stores so as not to raise the suspicions of the secret police (the Stasi). What they bought was not professional quality, but it would have to do.

**THEY HAD TO STITCH NEARLY 14,000 SQ FT OF FABRIC PIECES TOGETHER FOR THE BALLOON**

## THE BALLOON

They made the fabric part of the balloon from silk, sheets, and remnants of tents and umbrellas, using a manual sewing machine and heavy-duty thread.

## THE BURNER AND BASKET

The burner was constructed from a propane-gas tank connected to a valve, which enabled them to control the released gas and flames.

The basket was made out of a steel plate welded to several poles, which were connected with braided ropes.

## NUMEROUS ATTEMPTS

To finish, they connected the basket to the fabric using nylon cords stitched over 48 vertical seams. All done!

They started testing the balloon, but it had several defects, and they had to have several goes before they were satisfied with the result.