

17.9.79

3021/4

Ausschnitt aus Zeitung von Christchurch, Neuseeland

E. German families float to West in home-made balloon

NZPA-Reuter Naila, West

Germany
Two East German families have escaped to the West in a home-made hot-air balloon made out of curtains and bed sheets.

The balloon, containing four adults and four children, bumped down near the Bavarian town of Naila at 3 a.m. on Sunday after a 30-minute flight under cover of darkness from Poessneck on the East German side of the border.

The craft, piloted by a 37-year-old aircraft mechanic, Peter Stelzyk, covered 40kms.

With him were his wife and two children, aged 15 and 11. The other family consisted of a 24-year-old builder, Guenter Wetzel, his wife, Petra, and their child, aged five and two.

Mr Wetzel and the 11-year-old child were slightly hurt during the landing.

It was the family's second attempt at the first balloon escape from East Germany. Bad weather forced them back when they tried to reach the West on July 4.

Mrs Wetzel hugged her two-year-old son, Alexander, and said: "I am so happy that we're safely on the ground again. I can only say 'never again'."

The balloon soared 700m over part of the border fortified by the East Germans with mines and self-firing guns.

The escapers said they had one unnerving moment when the craft was caught in a border spotlight, but no shot were fired.

The balloon, fuelled by four propane gas cylinders, landed in a hedge 5km inside West Germany.

The two wives worked for months to make the balloon, painstakingly stitching to-

gether bedclothes and curtains.

The balloonists were reluctant to give details of their exploit. Mr Stelzyk said: "This could prejudice the chances of other East Germans who want to escape."

The escapees said they had got away for purely political reasons. "Things were pretty good for us over there by East German standards," said Mr Stelzyk. "But it was no longer possible for us to lie to our children and put up with the political conditions in East Germany."

Naila, a community of 9300, immediately rallied to the help of its visitors. The Mayor (Mr Robert Strobel) offered flats to both families and said: "Jobs, too, can certainly be found."

When the balloon with its 2 sq.m. platform touched down, the families were not

certain that they had reached West Germany.

"The first thing we did was to hide the women and children," Mr Stelzyk said. "Guenter Wetzel and I hid in a barn."

They emerged spotting a police car and asked: "Are we in the West?"

Tougher East German security has forced escapers to become increasingly more ingenious. Several East Germans have reached the West aboard light aircraft and others have escaped by boat across the Baltic.

Some still run the gauntlet of the booby-trapped border with its mines, guns, and dogs. Escape organisations favour smuggling people out in the boots of cars.

About 450 people escaped from the East last year, down from the previous annual rate of 800, according to the Bonn Government.