P.S. to the NEWS
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HOW MUCH IS FREEDOM WORTH?

What kind of living conditions would you find so intolerable that, to escape them, you would voluntarily assume a high risk of losing your life and the lives of your spouse and children, and even with the best of luck you would surely lose all your possessions and savings accumulated over your lifetime? Can you imagine any conditions that bad?

Yet, every day courageous individuals are taking those risks and making those sacrifices to escape from Communism. They are running through mined fields, tunnelling under electric barbed-wire fences, dodging machine-gun fire, hiding from police spotlights, swimming through shark-infested waters, and crowding in unseaworthy boats.

Every year since the Berlin Wall was built almost two decades ago, thousands of people have tried to get past that heavily-guarded and fortified border. Several hundred are successful each year, but the odds against them increase all the time. As the Soviets make their fortifications more deadly, those daring souls on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain must make their escape plans even more ingenious.

Among this year's lucky few who managed to elude the border guards were a couple and their two-year-old child who floated 40 miles in a rubber dinghy across the Baltic Sea, a snorkeler who made it across a canal, and the U.S. Ambassador's chauffeur who drove the official car across the border to freedom with his wife and child locked in the trunk.

But the one escape this year which has captured the imagination of Europeans as demonstrating resourcefulness and courage par excellence was achieved by the two families who rode a homemade, Rube Goldberg, hot-air balloon on a 15-mile, 28-minute flight to freedom in 2:00 a.m. darkness.

Peter Strelzyk is a 37-year-old electrician and mechanic and Guenter Wetzel is a

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24-year-old bricklayer. Friends and tinkerers, they got the escape idea from a television program, and then spent two years studying and experimenting with balloons.

They would have tried their escape much sooner, but they determined to bring out their wives and children, too. As their part of the project, the wives worked for months tightly stitching a 60-foot wide, 75-foot high balloon out of bed sheets, curtains, shower liners, and bits of cloth of every variety of fabric and color.

The night of the dramatic escape, the balloon rose 6,000 feet into the air over East Germany with the two husbands and wives and their four children ages 15, 11, 5 and 2. They huddled on a tiny five-foot gondola on which most of the space was taken up by four propane tanks and a homemade flame thrower.

The men had waited for the right night when the winds were just right, they hoped, to blow them across the border. As the hot air in the bedsheets cooled, the balloon lost altitude and dropped the families safely into a West German pasture.

By East German standards, the Strelzyks and the Wetzels had had a rather good middle class life. Each family had a house, a car, a television, and a washing machine, all of which they had to leave behind. But they just couldn't endure living any longer in a Communist country because there is no freedom.

The spectacular defections of the three leading Bolshoi dancers and the two Russian skating champions show that even the superstars who enjoy the best of whatever the Communist system has to offer want to escape if they get the chance. The members of the Moscow State Symphony won't get that chance because the Kremlin is keeping them locked in the prison called the Soviet Union.

President Carter, who admitted to Senators that he does not know what to do about Soviet troops in Cuba, has now called in for advice a group of former officials of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, including even Panama Canal Treaty negotiator Sol Linowitz. But those are all the same people, along with Secretaries Cyrus Vance and Harold Brown, who got us in our present predicament by their policy of always giving in to the Soviets while they are building strategic superiority and we remain in a weapons freeze

To find out how to deal with the Soviets, President Carter should consult with those who really understand them, the defectors. These should include Arkady Shevchenko, who was UN Under Secretary General when he defected in April 1978, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who is living in Vermont.