

*Izzy's Fire: Finding Humanity in the Holocaust* by Nancy Wright Beasley  
recommended by Sharon Baldacci

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Sharon Baldacci—author of the novel *A Sundog Moment*—recommends *Izzy's Fire: Finding Humanity in the Holocaust* by Nancy Wright Beasley. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



When I was in elementary school, someone gave me *The Diary of Anne Frank* to read. I found it puzzling, not having any idea why the family was hiding or from whom.

Years later I learned about the Holocaust—the “final solution”—and it was even worse. It was so immense and so horrible; it’s a part of history that is overwhelming. When Nancy Beasley asked me to read sample chapters that would become her first non-fiction book, *Izzy's Fire*, I agreed because she is a friend and a fellow writer. But before I read the first word I instinctively guarded myself to keep from becoming emotionally involved.

Ironically, this story is so filled with hope even while accurately portraying what happened, that I easily entered into the world of Israel and Eta Ipson. The first chapter’s sentence, moments before the family’s escape, is riveting. “The sound of the guard’s boots on the hard street ripped through the silence of the night.”

The title comes from what his family called the woman he married. She was his fire, the love of his life and the spark that kept him focused on protecting his family. The story is told through her gentle voice. Eta, later changed to Edna when they moved to America, was a happy wife and mother, enjoying her “simple but meaningful life in Lithuania in 1938.” All too soon, their world was in danger. “It was apparent that Hitler’s power was beginning to seep across all strata of European Jewish life like a

blinding snowstorm, covering everything in its path.”

Eventually Jews were corralled into a ghetto and used as slave laborers, where living conditions were harsh and random acts of cruelty was too often the norm. Incredibly it was Izzy’s intuition time and time again that saved them from following so many others to death.

This is the true story that inspired the Virginia Holocaust museum. The family would ultimately be saved by poor Christian farmers who helped them hide in a dug-out potato field for several months, until the Russian Army liberated them. Edna describes being underground in hiding: “we would be like animals trapped in a dark cage.... The months spent in complete darkness seemed endless. We all seemed to be in a coma. Days and nights became synonymous.”

Before their ordeal was over, 13 people would be sharing that tomb, where silence had to rule because the threat of discovery was always present.

Complete with maps, time lines, pictures, and as complete a history as one may get from survivors of Hitler’s final solution, I want my sons to read this, to get small but not overwhelming view of the Holocaust. This book is being taught in schools systems up and down the East Coast and rightly so. It shows the worst of humanity and, thankfully, the best.