

# Community Page

## Professor gets first-hand account of Second World War atrocities during trip to China

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

*The Champion*

It was a voyage of discovery — albeit, not a joyous or light-hearted one.

Part of a 17-member educational expedition this summer, local history professor Charles Leskun journeyed to China — enjoying a first-hand look at the country's unprecedented economic development and social change.

However, the 50-year-old Miltonian and his fellow globetrotters were there to unearth the past — specifically, the atrocities suffered at the hands of occupying Imperial Japanese forces before and during the Second World War.

While these horrendous acts aren't exactly a secret, Mr. Leskun stresses that they're hardly common knowledge when compared to the Holocaust.

"The common recognition is what happened to the Jews, the 12 million or so that were murdered by the Nazis," explained the York University professor, a co-author of two Canadian history books currently being used as part of many Ontario high school curriculums. "At this point in time, very few Canadians either know about it (atrocities in China) or are able to remember it."

In their ongoing efforts to help change that, Mr. Leskun and company traveled extensively throughout China over a 16-day period — speaking to dozens of war victims, many of whom have only started coming forward with their nightmarish stories in recent years.

One who struck a particularly strong chord with the Milton historian — who's been interested in this part of the war since his own university days — was Madam Wan Ai-hua.

Now in her eighties, she was among untold thousands of Chinese and Korean sexual slaves for the Imperial Japanese soldiers, who referred to them as comfort women. A newly-wedded 14-year-old at the time of her enslavement, Madam Wan Ai-hua recalled being sexually assaulted up to 20 times a day, as well as being severely beaten after two unsuccessful escape attempts.

Although finally managing to get away, her horrible ordeal was far from over. Seen as damaged goods upon returning to her village, she was chastised by her husband and family — a fate not uncommon for these comfort women, whose shame usually far outlasted their abuse.

"Most of them still haven't come forward because of their sense of guilt and shame," Mr. Leskun explained.

As horrific as this sexual slavery was, it represents merely one component of the immeasurable violence inflicted upon the Chinese people.

Mirroring the Nazis' systematic slaughter of

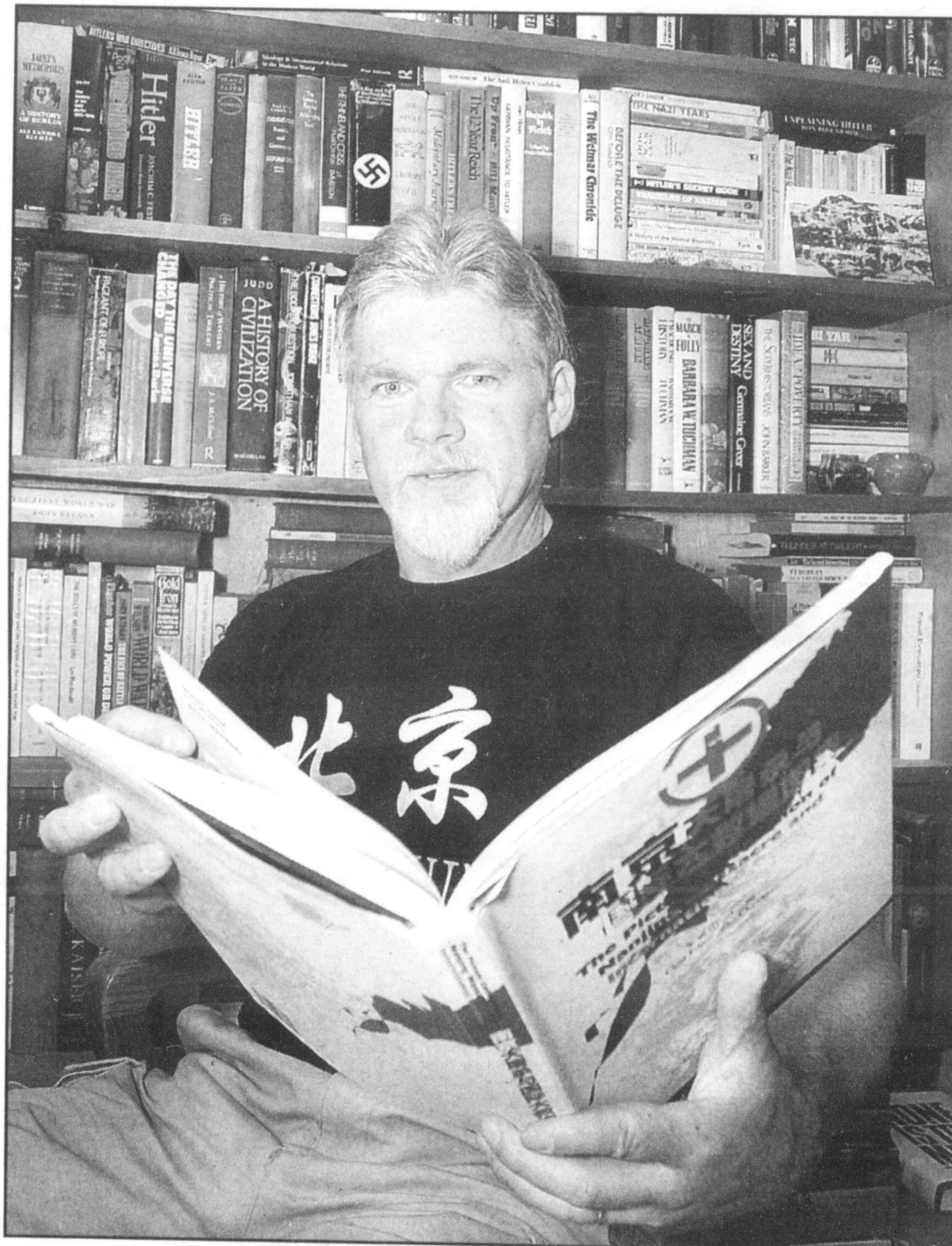


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Milton professor Charles Leskun has been studying the atrocities of the Second World War for many years, but got a much greater insight into these crimes against humanity during his trip to China.

the Jews, Imperial Japanese soldiers executed their fair share of mass murders — in one case killing an estimated 20,000 Chinese along a river side.

Mr. Leskun talked to one survivor who in the widespread confusion of the times actually joined a large group of marching Chinese, not realizing at first of the impending slaughter that was to come. Fortunately, he and two friends

were able to make their way to the back of the line and flee through a nearby wall — though staying close enough to witness the mass execution.

"Apparently their were two high ranking Imperial Japanese officers that had a competition going over who could kill 100 Chinese people first," added Mr. Leskun. "They had to extend the 'game' when they both reached it at the same

time. It was just horrendous stuff going on."

Complementing traditional firepower was a slew of chemical and biological weapons — all of which were used in abundance throughout the country.

The fallout from this type of warfare was so great that there's a particular community still widely known as 'Rotton Legs Village', where Mr. Leskun's group visited during their first week and talked to many anthrax victims.

Among them was an old man named Cheng Chong Wen, who actually considers himself lucky to have survived the war at all.

"It was incredible to see all the people who still have open wounds," said Mr. Leskun.

Also paralleling the Nazis in terms of slave labour, Imperial Japanese soldiers forced much of China's male population to work in mines and factories.

While Mr. Leskun had been privy to these atrocities long before the trip — having studied them for years and spoken to many Chinese immigrants who'd survived the war — he stressed that visiting the places where those affronts to humanity took place shed a whole new light on the situation.

"I was terribly moved by the circumstances of the people we interviewed," he remarked. "But on the flip side, I was equally touched to hear about the random acts of kindness that went on during this time."

While he's quick to point out that the Japanese people should obviously not be held accountable for the sins of their Imperial predecessors, Mr. Leskun says it's a shame that the Japanese government has yet to make an official recognition of its war crimes — despite efforts since 1997 by chief advocate Wang Xuan and a host of supporters to bring these atrocities to a more formal light.

"It's more or less been a whitewash," said Mr. Leskun.

He'd love nothing more than to play a small part in rectifying that, but will be content with broadening Canadian youth's knowledge about this horrific part of the war with his fellow historians — which will be done through a soon-to-be written book documenting the group's recent findings.

"My two hopes would be that the more people read and talk about this the less likely youth will ever follow orders to act in this manner again, and that more advocates come forward to help the Chinese people get some kind of compensation," he said.

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Tuesday, August 31		Wednesday, September 1		Thursday, September 2		Friday, September 3		Saturday, September 4		Sunday, September 5		Monday, September 6	
9, 10, 11am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10, 11am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10, 11am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10, 11am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!	9, 10, 11am & 12:30pm	Plugged In!
5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!	1:00pm	Fergus Highland Games	1:00pm	Milton Council - Aug 30	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!	4:30pm	TV Cogeco Sports: TBA	10:30pm	TV Cogeco Sports: TBA	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!
8:00pm	Fergus Highland Games	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!			7:30pm	Plugged In!	5pm, 6pm & 7:30pm	Plugged In!		
		8:00pm	Milton Council - Aug 30										

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