

JEWISH groups expressed shock yesterday after a 97-year-old Hungarian man was cleared of war crimes charges for his role in raids by Hungarian forces that killed hundreds of civilians in Serbia during World War II.

Many had considered the case of Sandor Kepiro one of the last major trials of Holocaust-era war criminal suspects. ``It's an absolutely outrageous decision," Efraim Zuroff, chief Nazi hunter with the Wiesenthal Centre's Jerusalem office, said.

``(It) flies in the face of all the evidence, everything we know about this dark event and the mass murder that took place in Novi Sad," said Mr Zuroff, who brought Kepiro's case to light in 2006.

Kepiro had been charged with involvement in the killing of 36 people - mostly Jews and Serbs - during the anti-partisan raid in the Serbian city of Novi Sad, then under Hungarian control, on January 23, 1942. He returned to Hungary in 1996, after decades in Argentina.

In Serbia, deputy war crimes prosecutor Bruno Vekaric said he expected Hungarian prosecutors to appeal the verdict by a three-judge tribunal of the Budapest Court.

``Of course, we are not pleased," Mr Vekaric said. Prosecutors and the defence have until late on Friday to appeal.

Elan Steinberg, of the New York-based American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants, condemned the verdict.

``Holocaust survivors view this verdict as a betrayal by Hungarian judicial authorities of the demands of justice and memory," he said.

``Hungary has turned its back on history in failing to come to grips with its collaborationist policies with the Nazi regime during World War II."

Hungary was a member of the Axis powers - allied with Germany, Italy and Japan - from 1940, participating in the 1941 invasion of Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was then part.

Prosecutors said during the trial, which began on May 5, that unidentified members of a patrol under Kepiro's command killed four people during the raid. Kepiro, at the time a gendarmerie captain, also was suspected of involvement in the deaths of two brothers and around 30 other people executed on the banks of the Danube.

Many of the dozens of people attending the court session cheered and clapped after Judge Bela Varga read out the verdict of the tribunal.