

LITHUANIA has begun an official investigation into war crimes

allegations against an 88-year-old Adelaide pensioner.

Antanas Gudelis, of Prospect, allegedly took part in the shooting of civilians, including Jews, in Nazi-occupied Lithuania in 1941.

The Lithuanian Government Prosecutor-General's Office said yesterday a prosecution investigation was under way based on information gathered by judicial officers and by the Nazi-hunting Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Geneva.

Mr Gudelis's lawyer, Ms Leni Palk, said the allegations were ``strenuously denied".

If charges are laid, Lithuanian authorities may seek Mr Gudelis's extradition even though, under the country's laws, a trial can be held in absentia.

The chief prosecutor of the Special Investigations Department of the Prosecutor-General's Office, Mr Rimvydas Valentukevicius, said material in his office's possession indicated Mr Gudelis, born in 1911, headed a military unit under the German occupational authority in the town of Kupiskis in 1941.

It was seeking assistance from Australian authorities in pursuing the case. A spokesman for the Justice Minister, Senator Vanstone, said no request had yet been received.

Australia does not have an extradition arrangement with Lithuania. The spokesman said extradition applications from non-treaty nations were considered on a case-by-case basis.

The Wiesenthal Centre announced in February that it planned to use Mr Gudelis as an international test case.

Mr Gudelis migrated to Australia from Germany in 1949 and became an

Australian citizen in South Australia in 1958. He was one of hundreds of people interviewed by the now-disbanded Australian Federal Police war crimes unit in the late 1980s.

The president of the SA Lithuanian Society, Mr Vytautas Neverauskas, said he was not aware of the charges but he did not believe Mr Gudelis was guilty.

The president of the Jewish Community Council of SA, Mr Normal Schueler, said he had not heard the reports.

“But it is good that independent people are seeking to pursue justice . . .” he said.

Three suspected war criminals living in South Australia have previously been charged under the Australian War Crimes Act.

Ivan Polyukhovich, 73, was charged in 1990 over the murder of 850 Jews between 1941 and 1943 in the Ukraine. He was acquitted in May, 1993, and died, aged 81, on October 1 last year.

Heinrich Wagner was charged in 1991 with being involved in the death of 124 people in the Ukraine between 1942 and 1943. The charges were withdrawn because of ill health.

Mikolay Berezowsky was charged in 1991 over the murder of 62 Jews between March 1 and July 31, 1942, but there was insufficient evidence for trial.