

Antanas Gudelis, 87, is said to be a loving old man, a husband and grandfather, who cannot communicate very well because of deafness and who is a worry to his family because he has to take 15 different medicines a day to maintain his health.

That's the way his granddaughter, Ms Natalie Gudelis, views the man who came to Australia in 1949, allegedly to escape the political regime in his native Lithuania.

She says she knows little about her grandfather's past but is adamant the allegations last week against him are not true.

Mr Gudelis, from the Adelaide suburb of Prospect, has been linked by the Simon Wiesenthal Centre with Lithuanian units that murdered Jews during World War II, notably in Kaunas and Kupiskis.

There were more than 200,000 Jews in Lithuania when the Germans invaded. Only 1700 remained after the war.

War crimes investigator Dr Efraim Zuroff, who heads the Centre's Jerusalem office, wants Mr Gudelis to be extradited to Lithuania or to be tried in absentia for alleged wartime activities.

But Mr Gudelis's son, Mr Edward Gudelis, told The Sunday Age his father was innocent. "He didn't do it," he said.

Mr Gudelis confirmed his father had been questioned by the Special Investigations Unit in the late 1980s about alleged war crimes. The unit was set up by the Federal Government to track war criminals in Australia.

But Mr Gudelis said he knew nothing of claims by Dr Zuroff that his father's case had been published in the Special Investigations Unit's report to Federal Parliament in the "insufficient evidence" category and had been referred to as PU562.

The report said that, despite some testimony and documents that placed PU562 at Kupiskis and also Kaunas during the German occupation, it had been unable to obtain evidence which would prove the commission of a war crime.

"Although the SIU held the view that this allegation had substance, it was unable to gather enough admissible evidence to refer this case to the (Director of Public Prosecutions)," the report said.

The investigations unit said PU562 had migrated to Australia in 1949 and was naturalised in South Australia in 1958. On his migration application, PU562 had said he had travelled to Germany to escape the political regime at home. He had stated he had been a lieutenant in the Lithuanian army for six years, had worked for two years as a clerk and for a further two years as a farmworker. He had agreed he had been in Kaunas and Kupiskis.

He was interviewed twice by the investigations unit, in 1989 and 1991, "but was only prepared to give his name, his date and place of birth, and confirmation that he had served as a lieutenant in the Lithuanian army", says the unit's report.

The unit reported that witnesses had established that PU562 was in charge of a company of soldiers from the Lithuanian army near Kupiskis and that they had remained there for several days after the German invasion.

"The SIU also obtained from witnesses information that at some stage PU562 went to Kupiskis. After discussions with German officials there, the other soldiers joined him in Kupiskis to work for the Germans. Their duties included working on the execution squad.

"Despite this, none of the witnesses interviewed by the SIU were able to place PU562 at an execution site, or to implicate him in the executions."

The unit's report said PU562 on 25 August, 1941 had been given command of the 7th Company of the Auxiliary Police Battalion in Kaunas. One witness put PU562 in Kaunas in the spring of 1942.

"At that time, there were a number of executions carried out in Kaunas which involved collaborators and former Lithuanian army soldiers, who were working for the Germans," the report said.

At the family's Prospect home this week, the awnings were down and the venetian blinds were drawn. Mr Gudelis's wife, who is also in ill-health, answered the door, saying no one wished to speak. "Just leave us alone, please," she said in heavily accented English from behind a security door.

A Lithuanian neighbor, who has known Mr Gudelis since he came to Adelaide in the 1950s and with whom Mr Gudelis exchanges Lithuanian newspapers, said Mr Gudelis recently assured her of his innocence.

"We talked the other day and he said, 'I haven't done anything', " the neighbor said. "It's not true."

The neighbor, who declined to be named, said she had met other Lithuanians about a week ago and discussed Mr Gudelis's alleged involvement in war crimes.

"He was in the army, yes, but a lot of people were in the army, it means nothing," she said. "People that know him from back home say it's a lot of bullshit."

However, the unit report quotes a Soviet publication as stating PU562 was alleged to have been the right-hand-man and chief of a punitive section in Kupiskis under the command of Werner Loew.

"The article described one particular occasion where the jail in Kupiskis was overcrowded with prisoners. The prisoners were beaten and tortured and dragged to the Jewish cemetery where pits had been dug. PU562 then, allegedly, issued the command to start shooting."

A German investigation into Loew was halted because he was deemed unfit for trial. He died in 1990.

The issue of Mr Gudelis has prompted Jewish leaders to press for action against those in Australia alleged to have committed war crimes and to escaped justice because the SIU was closed down. "There is a moral imperative for Australian legislation to change laws so that Australia can no longer be used as a safe haven for Nazi murderers," said Dr Colin Rubenstein, the executive director of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council.

Dr Rubenstein said Mr Gudelis was the subject of serious allegations of involvement in crimes against humanity. He also said the Jewish community was disappointed the Australian Government had not found a way to deal with people such as Melbourne resident, and alleged war criminal, Mr Konrad Kalejs - who has been deported from the US and Canada because of his past - and Mr Karlis Ozols, "regarded as one of the most serious war criminals never to have faced trial".

In Federal Parliament, Mr Michael Danby, the member for Melbourne Ports, said last week: "...There is clearly a case for the Australian Government sending back to their countries of origin Ozols, Kalejs and the Adelaide man, all of whom lied their way into Australia."