

ADELAIDE, Australia (Reuter-AP) - The first witness to give evidence in Australia's landmark trial of an alleged Nazi war criminal told today how skeletons and skulls were uncovered in a mass grave in the Ukraine by Australian and Soviet investigators.

As the accused, Ivan Polyukhovich, 75, listened intently to an interpreter translating the proceedings into Polish, a police detective described his part in the exhumation of human remains nearly 50 years after the German wartime occupation of the Ukraine.

Graphic video footage of the grave containing hundreds of bodies was shown in the court.

The video was taken by police Detective Sergeant David Hughes, who was part of an Australian-Soviet team that exhumed the site in a pine forest, three kilometres (two miles) outside the Ukraine village of Serniki in June, 1990.

The grave was about 40 metres long, 3 metres wide and 3 metres deep, he said.

A backhoe and two bulldozers were used to unearth the human remains which were piled in layers at one end of the grave, he told the Adelaide magistrates court.

Skeletons were discovered face-down in layers, some clothed, others naked, Hughes said.

He told the court how a brooch and a pocket watch were found inside the heel of a victim's leather boot.

Some of the skulls had small fractures while others had been caved in, Hughes said. They were all examined and reinterred.

Polyukhovich, now an Australian citizen, first appeared in court in January last year, but his case was delayed after he apparently shot himself in the stomach on the eve of court proceedings six months later.

He launched a lengthy constitutional challenge to have Australia's 1989 war crimes laws declared invalid which was finally rejected by the country's High Court last August.

The prosecution has alleged that Polyukhovich helped carry out the killings after he became a member of a police force set up in Serniki by the Nazis after the German invasion of the Ukraine.

Conviction could bring life imprisonment.

Outside the court, which will determine whether Polyukhovich should stand trial, a small band of right-wing protesters voiced their opposition to the trial.

Among them was former South Australian lieutenant-governor Sir Walter Crocker, who said the trial was a waste of taxpayers' money.

Crocker, 90, said the case involved no crimes against Australians and no crimes against Australia.

"This and related trials are not driven by justice but by hatred and revenge," Crocker said in a statement.

The hearing continues tomorrow.