

Australia's first Nazi war-crimes trial opened Thursday, more than three years after a 76-year-old Adelaide pensioner was first charged under controversial laws passed in 1988.

Ivan Polyukhovich pleaded not guilty to charges of being knowingly involved in the murder of up to 850 Jews during World War II. The murders took place in 1942 in the Nazi-occupied Ukraine village of Serniki.

He also has denied murdering a Jewish woman known as ""the miller's daughter"" and two Jewish children near Serniki in 1942.

Judge Brian Cox warned a Supreme Court jury to ignore any preconceptions they might have because of the extensive publicity and to focus on the evidence before them.

The case was postponed several times because of the ill-health of the accused, legal delays and constitutional challenges.

Polyukhovich, now an Australian citizen, was the first person to be prosecuted under the war-crimes laws.

Only two others have been charged since then. The three cases could be the last following the federal government's decision last June to withdraw funding for the special unit set up to carry out war-crime investigations.

In the past five years, the war-crimes unit has cost about Australian \$20-million (\$14-million) but has yet to gain a conviction.

The trial is expected to last about six weeks.