Hitler's bodyguard Rochus Misch dies at 96

Misch was last surviving witness to Hitler's final hours and remained proud to the end about his years with Nazi leader

Rochus Misch, who served as Adolf Hitler's devoted bodyguard for most of the second world war and was the last remaining witness to the Nazi leader's final hours in his Berlin bunker, has died aged 96.

Misch died on Thursday in Berlin after a short illness, his biographer Burkhard Nachtigall confirmed on Friday.

Misch remained proud to the end about his years with Hitler, whom he affectionately called "boss". In an interview in 2005, he recalled Hitler as "a very normal man" and gave a riveting account of the German dictator's last days. "He was no brute. He was no monster. He was no superman," Misch said.

Born on 29 July 1917 in the tiny Silesian town of Alt Schalkowitz, in what today is Poland, Misch was orphaned at an early age. At 20 he decided to join the SS, an organisation
that he saw as a counterweight to a rising threat from the left. He signed up for the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, a unit founded to serve as Hitler's personal protection. "It was anti-communist, against Stalin - to protect Europe," Misch said. "I signed up in the war against Bolshevism, not for Adolf Hitler."

When Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Misch found himself in the vanguard, as his SS division was attached to a regular army unit for the blitzkrieg attack. He was shot and nearly killed while trying to negotiate the surrender of a fortress near Warsaw, and was sent to Germany to recover. There he was chosen in May 1940 as one of two SS men who would serve as Hitler's bodyguards and general assistants, doing everything from answering the telephones to greeting dignitaries.

Misch and his comrade Johannes Hentschel accompanied Hitler almost everywhere he went, including his Alpine retreat in Berchtesgaden and his "Wolf's Lair" headquarters. "He was a wonderful boss," Misch said. "I lived with him for five years. We were the closest people who worked with him ... we were always there. Hitler was never without us day and night."

In the last days of Hitler's life, Misch followed him to live underground, protected by the so-called Führerbunker's heavily reinforced concrete ceilings and walls. "Hentschel ran the lights, air and water and I did the telephones - there was nobody else," he said. "When someone would come downstairs we couldn't even offer them a place to sit. It was far too small."

He recalled that on 22 April 1945, two days before two Soviet armies completed their encirclement of Berlin, Hitler said: "That's it. The war is lost. Everybody can go."

"Everyone except those who still had jobs to do like us - we had to stay," Misch said. "The lights, water, telephone ... those had to be kept going but everybody else was allowed to go and almost all were gone immediately."

Following the German surrender on 7 May, Misch was taken to the Soviet Union where he spent the next nine years in prisoner of war camps before being allowed to return to Berlin in 1954. He reunited with his wife, Gerda, whom he had married in 1942, and opened up a shop.

In the 2005 interview Misch deflected questions of guilt or responsibility for the Holocaust, saying he knew nothing of the murder of 6 million Jews and Hitler had never brought up the Final Solution in his presence. "That was never a topic," he said emphatically. "Never."
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Rochus Misch in 2005, pointing at a picture of Adolf Hitler he took in the early 1940s. Photograph: Herbert Knosowski/AP

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