

"The unusual 'Top 10' of 'Mister Ambassador!'

Article by Pierre De Vuyst in Le Soir Magazine of April 24, 2013

At the end of his four-year mandate, U.S. Ambassador in Brussels Howard Gutman has genuinely fallen in love with our country, where he hopes to work and to live one week each month!

Final stretch for Howard Gutman. On July 23, he will end his four-year mandate as U.S. Ambassador to Belgium and he will depart for Washington with plenty of memories. Contrary to his predecessors who often confined themselves to the Embassy fortress, Howard Gutman decided to visit the entire country and to attend a maximum of official, commemorative, cultural, and folkloric events in Belgium. He actually set a totally atypical and almost surreal challenge for himself: visiting each of the 589 Belgian cities, communes, and villages. Worthy of the Guinness Book of Records, he has kept his word! Next Sunday, May 5,

the Ambassador will complete his tour of the country by visiting his 589th commune, i.e. Fourons. And in the afternoon, he will celebrate this event by hosting a reception in his official residence to which 600 very special guests representing the entire country will be invited, i.e. 589 mayors, ten Governors, and Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo.

A close advisor to President Obama, Howard Gutman is not a career diplomat but was a business lawyer in Washington before joining the circle of supporters of Barack Obama during the Presidential campaign. He is one of the 35 Ambassadors who are directly appointed by the President in key Embassies. Howard Gutman arrived in Belgium in 2009 with the difficult mission of making people forget the dark years under the Bush Administration, when the United States and the Old Europe were opposed on the war in Iraq. Diplomatic relations between Belgium and the world leading power were then somewhat cold.

Howard Gutman used all his sense of humor and friendliness to reverse the trend. 'I have spent four of the most amazing years of my life in Belgium. I have true fiends here and also incredible memories, first with people but also with some places. The first habit that Belgians have which surprised me is that, while Belgians are very capable and always do their best, they hide behind their modesty and kindness. I have given many speeches during these four years. And each time when I asked if there were questions, I got a huge silence and not a single hand would go up. Then I understood that you do not like to ask the first question. So I solved the problem: I tell people to immediately move to the second question and a lot of people raise their hand,' Ambassador Gutman explains laughing.

We asked him what his best ten memories are. 'I have more than that. I will never forget the Memorial Day ceremonies at U.S. military cemeteries, or my visit to the Mardasson in Bastogne. Or how could I forget the ceremony commemorating the ten years of the 9/11 attacks at the Saint Michel Cathedral in the presence of Crown Prince Philippe or the ceremony for the beatification of Father Damian at Tremelo in the presence of 7,000 people?' The Ambassador adds that he also likes Durbuy, the tiniest city in Belgium, a lot and he mentioned also that he was the first American Ambassador to pay an official visit to Charleroi and Molenbeek. Belgium is a country where surreal things can happen.

Howard Gutman is getting ready to return to the United States, but he will be back. 'Since I am not a career diplomat, I will quit the State Department and I do not want to be lawyer again either. I am considering becoming a consultant. I could be useful here in Belgium and in Europe on issues related to energy, agriculture, and other projects in bilateral relations with the U.S. I will travel a lot but I am also thinking of living here in Brussels one week each month. If this project materializes, I will probably in the coming months to look for a house or an apartment here. We have so many friends here, my wife and I! Although we love the United States, we also feel at home here. We cannot simply leave this country.'

The King of the most united country in the world

The Ambassador has many memories with the King, to begin with the day he presented his credentials and he forgot all protocol rules by beginning a conversation with the King, who did not have any problem with that. 'I surprised him when I told him that he is the King of the most united country in the world. Since he was surprised, I explained to him that, on the main societal issues, such as gun control, health care, abortion, and global warming, in the United States we are 51 percent vs. 49 whereas in Belgium you are 98 percent for! No matter what you may think, you are united! The King laughed and almost fell from his chair!'

Carnival of AalsT

'I remember my visit to the carnival of Aalst with floats inspired by past events. I was sitting next to the former Mayor and suddenly I discovered a representation of her, huge and totally naked on a float,' Howard Gutman recalls, mimicking how he turned his eyes away at the time.

Blanc-Moussis

'In Stavelot, they made me Chevalier of the Blanc-Moussis. And I was first scared because I was surrounded by men dressed in white sheets and white hoods. It looked like a Ku Klux Klan meeting. But I was soon reassured of their peaceful intentions.'

Beheaded in Genk (sic)

'In Genk (sic), they wanted to chop my head off and to bake another one. Fortunately it was just a joke!' Howard Gutman remembers that, in Genk (sic), he had to give a speech along with John Cleese, the famous comedian of Monty Python. 'I was supposed to do the warm-up act. The opening line was: what a fabulous and very special day for all of you with two very special speakers today. One is a talented and famous actor beloved throughout Belgium and the other one is John Cleese. The place went wild and John Cleese turned red. He could have killed me.'

Standard

'I watched a Standard game together with then Prime Minister Leterme. Next to me sat the wife of Didier Reynders. Leterme is incredible: each time Standard has the ball, he shouts. As soon as they lose the ball, he takes out his Blackberry and texts messages. Suddenly, near the very end of the game, Standard scored the winning goal. And Leterme jumped up in joy and grabbed me and we both fell on top of poor Mrs. Reynders. At that point I turned to my security and I said 'I was just attacked by a Belgian and you did nothing to protect me!'

Carnival of Binche

'This is another example of failing protection,' the Ambassador jokes. You know, the Gilles throw oranges but official guests are protected behind a barricade. Except me! I was on the balcony with my wife and my security. The Gilles saw us and began throwing oranges at us. And here I was trying to protect my wife as best I could as we were pelted with oranges while my security ducked!'

Food folklore

'Actually, you never stop eating at these folkloric events: in Geraardsbergen, I had to swallow a fish and shrimps in a glass of wine with fishermen on horseback at the Coast. Throwing food is also a Belgian specialty: nuts in Bastogne, oranges in Binche, candies elsewhere.'

A Statue in Buggenhout

'The commune of Buggenhout built a statue to commemorate my visit there. Do you realize? So when I traveled to other communes, I told people what Buggenhout had done. Mayors replied that they did not have the budget to do

the same but that they could name a street after me! I had to tell them that I was joking but they might have done it!'

Manneken-Pis

'I offered a new costume to Mannenken-Pis but I had to use a trick. It was the Uncle Sam outfit with Barack's slogan 'yes we can.' The committee first turned down the costume by saying that Manneken-Pis does not do politics. Using my legal skills as a very tough lawyer, I was able to find an argument that, during the campaign of Barack Obama it was a political symbol, but after the election it's cultural. And now on each July 4, Manneken-Pis will wear the Uncle Sam outfit to commemorate the U.S. Independence Day.

Meyboom in Brussels

'Brussels Mayor Freddy Thielemans invited me to carry the tree behind him. What I did not know was that he barely touched the tree and waved at the crowd but he did not really carry it! You can see how I look. And there I was carrying that tree which weighs almost a ton almost by myself, as I did not want to let it fall to the ground!'

The Red Devils

'I am a big fan of the Red Devils, which are a great team. I was fortunate to do the opening kick-off of the friendly game between the Devils and the U.S. national team. The game was covered on U.S. TV back in the States. My son who is studying at Columbia saw me on TV kicking the ball. Incredible!