

## **“The Number One Tourist”**

*Article by Valerie Colin in independent weekly Le Vif  
November 2, 2012*

***“Howard Gutman, U.S. Ambassador in Belgium, swore to visit each city and commune of Belgium. This time it was La Louviere, one of the last visits of a rather funny tour.”***

It is the same in each village: on the main square, two or three State Security agents discreetly looked over an amazing gentleman. With his red glasses on his nose, his suit – or his jeans, it depends – and his amusing accent, the man greeted a passer-by or two. This is the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium, Howard Gutman, 56. He is currently completing the challenge he set for himself in August 2009, soon after his nomination by his friend Obama, i.e. visiting each Belgian city and commune. It is a tour with 589 visits in total, some official and some ‘incognito.’

‘Hi guys!’ After having thrown confetti in Stavelot, nuts in Bastogne, and (fake) cats in Ieper, and having participated either as a simple visitor or as a guest of honor in all kinds of local folkloric activities, this time he was in La Louviere. On the agenda of Gutman, La Louviere was visit Number 470. In the city hall’s wedding room, PS Mayor Jacques Gobert, the mayor of 78,000 inhabitants, welcomed the witty representative of 314 million Americans. After talking about the industrial past of the city, the hydraulic boat lifts, the carnival, and Franco Dragone, the mayor had no choice but to mention, reluctantly and in French, the endemic unemployment rate of 21 percent. The conversation was rather difficult as neither the Ambassador nor the Mayor fully masters the other’s language, such that they seemed to exchange words rather than sentences. As colorful as his native Bronx, the Ambassador’s natural accent renders his French, which the Ambassador himself considers ‘terrible,’ more difficult to follow. But Gutman started learning French from scratch when he arrived. And for the past three years, his daily French and Dutch lessons have paid off, at least to a certain extent. Recently, after one third of the speech he was giving at the business club of Standard de Liege, guests discreetly stopped looking at him to look at the written text. Gutman is well aware of this. ‘These people probably thought I was speaking Ukrainian,’ he said.

Appearances can be deceiving. No one should take this intellectual for someone who is not serious – even if he has acted in several American movies including *Noise* in 2007 and *Fame* in 2009. Having graduated from Columbia and Harvard, having been a ‘super’ business lawyer in Washington for 27 years, having briefly worked at the FBI – dealing with counter terrorism and counter intelligence – and also briefly at the Supreme Court, he also worked a lot on Obama’s campaign, defending his positions on Fox News, the conservative and pro-Republican network. The man knows what he is doing and is obviously enjoying himself in Belgium. If Obama is reelected on November 6, Gutman, who is the first U.S. Ambassador in Belgium who does not come from diplomatic circles (sic,) might stay in our country until the summer of 2013. While waiting to find out what his future will be, Gutman continues to complete his tour of our country, with all the zeal of a new immigrant. To such an extent that he and his wife Michelle Loewinger probably know more about Binche, Aalst, Geraardsbergen, and Sint-Marten-Lathem than most Belgians do.

In just one afternoon, the visit to La Louviere included the former mining site of Bois du Luc, the Johnson and Johnson plant, and the engraving museum. The result is that, thanks to his numerous visits, and thanks to his frequent media appearances, Gutman, who is a relentless, enthusiastic, and down-to-earth visitor, has almost become a star in Flanders. On TV, he made all Flemish people laugh when he noted that because the verb comes at the end in Dutch sentences, ‘you need to wait until the end of the sentence to know what’s happening.’ He takes some pride in his initiative and likes to emphasize that, over a three-year period, Belgium saw the highest gain in favorable opinions vis-à-vis the United States in the world. He believes that he has had something to do with that.

At the Embassy, the map of Belgium is now almost fully covered with pins showing the cities he has visited and the internet site devoted to Gutman’s visits – [www.usembe.ning.com](http://www.usembe.ning.com) – has many hundreds of pictures taken throughout the country. ‘The idea of this tour of the entire country came to me when I got here,’ Gutman explained. ‘After a period when Belgian-U.S. relations were very bad, including because of Guantanamo, I wanted to rebuild the partnership by directly meeting with all people.’ It did not always work the way he planned. There were visits to villages covered with snow, both in Flanders and Wallonia, where the village seemed like ghost towns, except for the post office. Or villages where the police office had a sign indicating its opening hours. Gutman can’t get over that: ‘Absolutely crazy, it is like telling gangsters when to come,’ he said.