

“Howard Gutman: the American Ambassador in Brussels”

**“Obama Is the Only Man without Any Blood Pressure”**

“Brussels – ‘I have been a month in Brussels and have already lost six pounds. It is that busy that often I do not manage to touch food. Every day there is a reception, where the finest food is served. But then I am often talking away and I see the food pass right in front of my nose. It often ends with me having a warmed up sandwich from the microwave oven at night.’”

“If the cliché busy, busy, busy applies to someone, then it is to Howard Gutman, the American Ambassador in Brussels. Just before our visit to the wonderful residence in the Zinnerstraat, right by the Warandepark, a camera crew of ‘Koppen’ (VRT) comes out of the doorway, on its way to Mechelen, where the Ambassador is to go give a performance in 1 ½ hour.”

“We wait in the patio of the mansion, as the Ambassador is finishing a conversation with a colleague journalist.”

“Who is hearing a fifty-something studying diligently Dutch and French words here, is well allowed to know that Howard Gutman in a short lapse of time wants to master both languages of the country.”

“‘One day I am studying Dutch, the other day French’, the Ambassador says. On another account, Gutman publishes pictures of all his visits to places in Belgium – ‘I want to visit as fast as possible all cities and communes in this country, I want to talk to as many people as possible’ – on his very own Flickr-page.”

“Performances in TV series are not reserved for the Ambassador anymore: ‘As a U.S. government official, I am not allowed to work for extras, I even had to quit the board of the school where my children were going to school.’ Gutman, who knows George Clooney quite well for instance, has a small part in the just released movie ‘Fame’. Before he played – how can it be different – himself as a lawyer in the series K-street.”

“Gutman, who has worked for 27 years with success as an attorney in Washington, is a speech waterfall – be it with a voice that sounds like a rusty rasp. One of the first visits that Gutman made in Belgium was to the city of Bree.”

“Gutman is lyrical about Clysters and her hometown of Bree: ‘As a sports fan, I am deeply impressed by her, as a diplomat even more. Kim won the U.S. Open,

her first big comeback series, not just like that: she has won with charm and grace. She has proven that an Ambassador with a tennis racket is much more efficient than an Ambassador with a hoarse voice like myself.' Gutman does not finish talking about Bree: 'The city hall of Bree is the most beautiful I have ever seen, an old monastery that has been renovated with conservation of the old framework. If they ask me in New York or Los Angeles which city hall is the most beautiful one I have ever seen, then I answer in all truth Bree', Gutman laughs. 'Striking also is that Clysters knows everyone in her city. She treated everyone on free beer: she knows all those people, they are her neighbors.'"

Q: "During your appearance on De Laatste Show you said that Belgium, the eyes and ears of Europe, is an excellent place to raise a family. How are they doing here? And has your wife Michelle found her way around in Brussels?"

Ambassador Gutman: "My youngest son is a student here at the International School. He kind of likes it there. My oldest son studies at Yale University. He first wanted to go for law school, but I have managed to talk him out of that."

"My wife Michelle is having a great time. She has been working for 27 years as a dentist in Washington – the best dentist in town. Here in Brussels we are meeting with everybody; princes, ministers and kings, but also with common people. One of my first visits was to a community center in Molenbeek. And we are making new friends everywhere."

"Our first trip we have made together, in 1977, brought us also to Belgium. I do not remember so much of that, I do not even remember how my driveway looks like in Washington and I have only left a month. Michelle on the contrary remembers everything as if it were yesterday. She always laughs with me. You have got so much on your mind that you have no place for things like that, she then says."

"Howard Gutman is an American of the second generation. His father, a Polish Jew, died when Howard was barely sixteen years old. The life story of father Gutman is a perfect metaphor for the misery brought by the Second World War: 'My father has stayed in Poland during the whole war. He tried to join the resistance, but was refused because he was a Jew. Then he went undercover with a couple of people in the forests. Have you seen the movie 'Defiance', a story of Polish Jews who during the war committed acts of resistance from the forests? The story of my father is similar. After the war, he looked for a job in Warsaw and in Berlin, but he was sent away everywhere. He tried to immigrate to America, but he

did not manage to get out of Poland. Then he succeeded in Danzig (now Gdansk) to get hold of fake papers. With that fake passport, he in the end left to America, without speaking a word of English.”

“Only after the decease of my father, I have learnt that my real name is not Gutman; that is the name that my father has taken on. His real name was Mogilnicki. Look if you want to invent a name, then you choose Clooney or Affleck, don’t you?! No, my father wanted to be called Gutman. That was his first name by the way.”

“He never spoke about the war. Never, no word. He did not even tell me my real family name. And he made my mother promise to tell nothing about it.”

“Howard Gutman has been into the law business throughout his whole professional career. He was a partner at the prestigious law firm Williams & Connolly, where he represented also foreign heads of state. Gutman is also a veteran in the Democratic Party. As such, he defended the interests of former vice President Al Gore in 2000, when he lost the presidential elections to Bush, in spite of having received more votes.”

Q: “Do you still have the impression that 2000 was a stolen election?”

Ambassador Gutman: (after some hesitation an evasive answer follows) “I foremost have the feeling that I still believe in our judicial system. In America we have a fantastic judicial system and I am proud to have had the chance to work in it for 27 years. The judges in 2000 took the decision they took. That is by the way one of the few cases I have ever lost.”

Q: “Where and when have you met President Obama for the first time?”

Ambassador Gutman: “I have always been busy with politics. A few years ago, I have been on the road for seventeen months with Mark Warner, then Governor of Virginia. Mark, one of my oldest and best friends, understood that the presidential elections were nothing for him, in spite of the fact that he stood a definite chance. Mark tried to put me in touch with Barack Obama, but for a moment I was tired of politics.”

“One night in March of 2007, I got a call from Obama. If I wanted to talk with him for an hour, he would then postpone his flight to Chicago for an hour. The day after Obama in Illinois announced that he was running for President. Out of

politeness I went to go see him in Washington. I just met the next President of the United States, I said after to my wife.”

Q: “What did appeal to you in that man?”

Ambassador Gutman: “He was the first politician who wanted to serve the country, who did not have to win whatever it took. He was there to serve. If people did not want to vote for him, so it was, that was not part of his system.”

“Barack Obama is the only man without any blood pressure, so it seems to me. I wake up and my jacket is crooked. His suit never gets any crooks, he can go to the gym, but his jacket keeps on looking good, that calm is he. I trust his sense of judgment, his intelligence, his sense of justice. That all stands out when you meet him in person.”

Q: “The first newspaper articles portrayed him as a chilly, standoffish person.”

Ambassador Gutman: “I have told you that President Obama always keeps calm, that he does not have ant blood pressure. You can wrongly understand that as aloof. You can be sure that the President knows what is passion and involvement. Can you remain calm if you lose the first primaries in New Hampshire, if Fox News is taking shots at you? I am not mature enough for that; I am not a real leader.”

Q: “You have done press relations for Obama during the campaign, including with the arch-conservative Fox News network...”

Ambassador Gutman: “... I love Fox. Talking with Democrats, that is easy, becoming friends with your friends, that is easy. It comes down to turning your opponents into friends. As a President you need to make sure that everybody hears you, even those who do not agree with you. Where did the President make his first speech against anti-Semitism? Not on a Jewish place, but in a black church on Martin Luther King Day. The President went to Cairo and declared there that the American bond with Israel is unbreakable. He got applause from all sides, but he does not try to flatter.”

Q: “Upon his election, President Obama promised that he would only appoint career diplomats, that he would break with the tradition that rich fundraisers are rewarded with an Ambassador job. You are a so-called bundler, who managed to collect half a million dollar for the campaign. Is that not contradictory?”

Ambassador Gutman: (for the first time some irritation resounds in his answer)  
“Let me be clear. I am not a super-rich guy, I grew up working including as a busboy; since my sixteenth birthday, I have worked every day.”

“The Ambassador gives a long list of personal accomplishments and rests his plea with the words: “If you are talking about bundler in the sense of the type that is not qualified for his job, if you are talking about a rich man who is known in his country club and that can collect money as such, then you are not talking about me. I hope that President Obama has kept his promise to send a man with substance to Belgium, who is prepared for his task. I hope that the Belgians also will get to see it like that. And from the indications I get, they so far see it like that indeed.”

Q: “You see it as one of your missions to rebuild the partnership between America and Europe again. After eight years of Bush, the bond between both continents was truly strained.”

Ambassador Gutman: “Of course that relationship was tense. It does not make sense anymore to discuss the reasons. The problems in this world – global warming, the fight against terrorism, against war – makes that we have to row in the same direction, as partners on this planet. America does not become a strong brand by imposing that partnership, but by making sure that people come towards you.”

Q: “For you President Obama belongs on Mount Rushmore, the mountain in South Dakota where the heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln have been carved out in the rocks.”

Ambassador Gutman: “In my book the President is on Mount Rushmore since a very long time already.”