

“As I told Bart de Wever, the Dutch language is really difficult”

After July 4, Howard Gutman, the friend of Obama, will leave his job in Brussels

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Howard W. Gutman recently invited me to his residence. The U.S. Ambassador to Belgium will finish his tour after July 4, on U.S. Independence Day, after four years in Brussels, which will be a record since 1914. He will have a lot of fond memories.

It is not everyone who gets invited for breakfast by the U.S. Ambassador to Belgium. It is therefore joyfully that on a Tuesday in January I came to Rue Zinner, a few hundred meters from the Royal Palace.

Of course, one needs to show one's credentials before being allowed into a perimeter where actually three U.S. Embassies are located (sic): the bilateral, the Mission to the EU, and the Mission to NATO. We were taken to the bilateral Ambassador's residence, a majestic 18th century house. The hallway is in the center. To the right, one can see Howard Gutman sitting next to his language teacher.

A few minutes later in another room, Howard Gutman explained that, since he took his job in Brussels on August 14, 2009, he has been taking French and Dutch-language lessons. But it is in English that our conversation took place. And the Ambassador immediately admitted that of the two, 'Dutch is more difficult to learn. I actually told it to Bart De Wever and Kris Peeters. If Walloons have a hard time with Dutch, it is not because they do not want to learn it but because it is so difficult. Especially if you do not speak German.'

Learning languages is a topic that the Ambassador, who is a friend of Obama, likes to talk about. And can you imagine that he is about to complete the challenge that he had set for himself: indeed, he will soon have visited all 589 communes of Belgium. 'There is only one left, i.e. Fourons, where I intend to travel soon. I know that it is a place that has often been in the news in Belgium but I want to prove to Belgians that they are much more united than they think. In my country, 50 percent of the people support Obama, 50 percent are against. In Belgium, 98 percent support Obama. The same is true on major societal issues: health care, the right to

choose, gay rights, and climate change. Take New York and Texas: they are much more different than Wallonia is from Flanders,' Gutman explains. He even goes further in his analysis: 'Belgium is the most united country I know! But you do not realize it,' he says.

Yet, there is a big difference between Flemings and Walloons. 'In Wallonia, hardly anyone speaks English. If I were a decision-maker, I would force francophone TV stations to broadcast films and series in the original version with subtitles.'

But the Ambassador is sad. After July 4, he will leave Belgium after having spent four years in the capital. 'That is the way it goes. It is the U.S. State Department which wants it that way. You know, it is rare for an Ambassador to be in a post for more than three years. As far as I am concerned, I will have stayed four years. It hasn't happened since 1914 for a U.S. Ambassador to stay such a long time,' Howard Gutman points out.

Having graduated as a lawyer from the prestigious Harvard University, he will probably not stay in the diplomatic world. 'It would be hard to offer me something nicer than Ambassador to Belgium. I'd like to move to the private sector, give speeches and advise business people. And if no one wants me, I will be a lawyer again,' the Ambassador says.

To some extent, Howard Gutman, 56, makes me think of Woody Allen, because Gutman never misses an opportunity to say something funny. Having been raised in the Bronx, which is not really a wealthy neighborhood, the Ambassador made a brilliant career as a legal advisor. He worked at the Supreme Court and at the FBI and also wrote some of Barack Obama's speeches. At the Presidential Inauguration in 2008 (sic,) Howard Gutman was immediately behind the President. To thank him for his good and loyal services, Obama offered him the job as U.S. Ambassador to Belgium.

Gutman has other strings to his bow. Indeed, he was also an actor! He was a lawyer in 'K Street' on HBO. The fans of Tim Robbins saw him in 'Noise,' in which he played the role of a lawyer. And he also played a role in the remake of 'Fame.'

One thing is sure: the Belgians will not forget this atypical Ambassador.