

## “OBAMA’S CLONE IN BRUSSELS”



Caption under picture (© Bart Dewaele): “Visiting Antwerp: determined to give Antwerp fashion a boost in the U.S.”

*“AMBASSADOR GUTMAN HAS ONE THICK BLACKBERRY AND A LOT OF PLANS – Wherever you go on Belgian roads, you will meet Howard Gutman. The new American Ambassador is colorful, dynamic and reaches out a generous hand to poor and rich and to all races and religions. Portrait of a man who counts Barack Obama, George Clooney and Lance Armstrong amongst his friends – and eagerly makes use of those connections. Story by Steven De Foer, pictures by Bart Dewaele.”*

“Howard Gutman (53), since September 1 in office as Ambassador, is on his first official visit in Flanders. He is welcomed with open arms by Mayor Somers. That Sam Fox’ successor makes a fresh wind blow has become known quickly – certainly after Gutman’s striking performance on ‘De Laatste Show’, where he managed to defeat all prejudices about boring diplomats.”

“Somers escorts Gutman to the Royal Carillon School and to a historical tapestry manufacturer, but the most important moment of the day is Gutman’s speech at night in the former Lamot brewery.”

“Gutman – hoarse like a crow after again a couple of nights with too little sleep – talks about the common interest of Belgium and the U.S. with regards to issues like Afghanistan, climate change and the closure of Guantanamo. The audience is not a crowd of insiders consisting of industrials and local politicians, but is made out by students and pupils from vocational schools – including a strikingly

important delegation of immigrant origin youngsters. They hang for over half an hour on Gutman's lips. Is it because of Gutman's undeniable rhetorical qualities, or because of the fact that he is the representative of world star Obama?"

"During the reception, the Ambassador quickly puts aside his glass of wine for a Belgian local beer, and walks around – also amongst the immigrant origin youngsters. He does not limit himself to posing for pictures; he really wants to engage into a real conversation. That does not prove to be a sinecure with the giggling Moroccan youngsters, but the atmosphere is cordial. The sixteen year-old Nabil even invites the Ambassador at his place, both in Belgium as with his family in Morocco. Would he realize that this Howard Gutman is a son of a Polish Jew? Where Gutman appears, racial or religious questions become unimportant."

### **"SECOND ACT – BRUSSELS, DECEMBER 2, 1:50 AM"**

"The area around the Wetstraat is deserted. In front of the severely guarded residence of the Ambassador in the Zinnerstraat a couple of security people stand by to receive a couple of journalists. They are grinning. An Ambassador who in the midst of the night invites journalists in his living room to listen together – in an informal way, with cans of cola – to Obama's speech about Afghanistan: they had not gone through that before. 'We have not seen the last stunt of this man yet', one of them whispers. Also with the Embassy staff, Gutman after a couple of months is much more appreciated than his arch-conservative predecessor."

### **"THIRD ACT – ANTWERP, DECEMBER 8, AM"**

"Visit to the Antwerp World Diamond Centre. Funny how Gutman and his wife Michelle have each an own agenda. He asks questions about turnover and diamond business. She may be far from stupid (she had to give up a career as dentist in order to follow her husband): diamonds are a girl's best friends. And so she eagerly allows her fingers to be adorned with a series of amazing gems. 'Those are rated some seven to eight million Euros', one of the diamond traders says, and Gutman – laughing – blurts: 'Honey, put that back, or else call Donald Trump. Do not forget that now I am earning only six percent of what I was earning four months ago. I am a government official now.'"

“It comes out spontaneously, and a few people in the company cordially laugh along. Others look surprised. So much openness about your financial situation is not really usual. ‘Fresh’, ‘open’ and ‘different’ are the qualifications which I hear afterwards. With me, astonishment predominates. I know that Gutman has been a top-business lawyer for 25 years in Washington, and that that does not pay small bucks, but almost the twenty-fold of the wage of an American Ambassador?”

#### **“FOURTH ACT – ANTWERP, DECEMBER 8, LATE AFTERNOON”**

“Meeting with Walter Van Beirendonck and Dries Van Noten in the Fashion Museum. This visit has come about in the first place at the initiative of Gutman’s wife Michelle, who roots for Flemish designers, but the Ambassador himself also understands very well the importance of fashion for Antwerp. Also the multi-cultural origins of students at the fashion academy – the youngsters who are drawing designs come from Malaysia and Canada – please him very much.”

“In the corridor, we bump into a remarkable bunch. Like a tableau vivant in one-toned white, some ten people are standing, dressed in bizarre-looking historical outfits: a pastor, a joker, a page, a courtesan. This belongs to an assignment for second grade students: they needed to let themselves be inspired by a historical painting of their choice to a white creation, to be displayed by an own model. The Ambassador looks astonished: those people are not standing so still and tall there for me, are they? It does not come off as fake modesty, much more as the reflex of a business lawyer for which time has always been money. Right away, he walks up, and shakes hands with all those good people while he introduces himself. The page, a boy of some eight years old, looks up – surprised – as this odd, but cordial American gentleman asks him ‘are you having fun?’. Almost Gutman – according to veteran staff the first Ambassador who exchanges business cards everywhere – had also given one to this little boy.”

#### **“THE MAIN CHARACTER – GUTMAN, THE BRIDGE BUILDER”**

“Howard Gutman, the representative of Barack Obama in our country. His social skills appear from every step he makes, just as his lucidity. The first thing we

heard about him was that we would get an Ambassador who regularly plays roles in movies and had a sense of humor. Nice, but what is it to us? On the road with him a couple of days and you start to realize why Obama delegated him precisely to an all-in-all still pretty important diplomatic post.”

“From a top lawyer with degrees from Columbia and Harvard and a past with the Supreme Court and the FBI, you would think that he stems from a rich family. Nothing is less true. Gutman is the son of a Polish refugee Gitman Mogilnicki, who as only man in his village escaped a Nazi massacre. In 1950, Gutman’s father reached the U.S. with a fake passport. Little Howard grew up in small houses in The Bronx and Queens, not exactly the most fancy neighborhoods in town. That he was able to visit institutions like Columbia and Harvard was something he owed to his excellent school grades.”

“We had to research that. He himself does not boast about his origins, unless it proves handy for the message he wants to bring. Recently he told about the adventures of his father during a speech to the Jewish community. A remarkable speech, during which he admitted that part of the Jewish community in the U.S. initially despised him because he had chosen for Obama, the Muslim friend. Gutman knows that his origins give him credibility amongst Jewish people, and he uses it to convince them that Obama’s stretched hand to the Muslim world does not need to be seen as a rejection of friendship for the Jewish people. A smart mix of personal experiences and a political message: sometimes he reminds his boss, indeed.”

“That Gutman is an Obama-man is apparent from his reaching out-politics. This is the man whose first two visits in our country led to Charleroi, for a program including a meeting with unemployed mothers, and to a youth center full of immigrant youngsters in Molenbeek, which he subsequently also invited to his residence. ‘I have nothing against a good dinner’, Gutman says during a calm chat in one of the many salons of the enormous residence. ‘And I also like to talk in front of the Chamber of Commerce. But I want to build bridges with all people in this country. And certainly also with the Muslim community. In that respect we work – that is me and the other new Ambassadors in Europe – on from the

Obama speech in Cairo. Obama then said that the bond between the U.S. and Israel is unbreakable. That it is cowardice to blow up buses. And he received a standing ovation for that; in a Muslim country. Because they felt that as far as he is concerned, it is over with heroes and villains, us against them. There are no winners if you cannot talk with each other as partners. I am doing the same. During my term in office, I want to have been in every commune in Belgium. I want to talk with everyone. Because poverty, healthcare and climate change are not supposed to be issues pertaining to one religion or one race against another.”

### **“GUTMAN – THE SUPPORTER”**

“Inspiring. But Gutman himself is also inspired. Nothing about his admiration for his president is an act – such an excellent actor he will not have become through those supporting roles in movies and TV-series. How hard he supports for Obama also appears during the nightly visit for the Afghanistan-speech. With one eye – he thinks that nobody sees him sitting in his corner – I see him taking notes, but also especially nodding in an admiring way. This is not an employee; it is a supporter in every sense of the word.”

“It is that fiery belief that Obama can really bring change that made Gutman and his spouse make the step towards the Ambassadorship. He loves to tell how he was charmed by the later president (see under) and has trouble to hide his disdain of ambassadors who – like his predecessor, which of course he does not say – were merely paid with such a post in exchange for their financial support.”

“The 28 new ambassadors that Obama foremost sent to European countries form by the way a club of single-minded people and fervent believers. ‘We are friends and we can truly count on each other’, Gutman admits. ‘We all believe in Obama’s message, and we also helped him with his election. Me, I have foremost been talking to unions and Jewish associations, to tell them about why Obama needed to become president. I also dealt with explaining his policy options on Fox News. The others also were men of all trades, but it was never in the first place about collecting money. Of course we did it. If people knew that you were working for Obama’s campaign, they as a matter of speaking came to put money in your hands. But if we are sitting here today, then it is foremost because we are a club

of hard workers who to the core believe in Obama's message about repairing the worst economic recession in 75 years, the relations in the Middle-East, healthcare and climate. That man just always has the right priorities and the right proposals, and we believe that he can also help to bring solutions.'"

"It sounds sincere, and that also appears from the pictures in the residence. A warm Obama, physically speaking, who cuddles Gutman's children and on every posed picture puts his arm around his assistants. Next to that still old pictures of Bill Clinton with friends, ever with a far more distant hand. From George W. Bush, clearly loathed by Gutman, no single picture in the whole building."

### **"GUTMAN – THE ENTHUSIAST"**

"And so Gutman works with heart and soul at the execution of the partnership with the rest of the world, as ambitioned by Obama. On big moments, like when he escorts Hillary Clinton or Richard Holbrooke during their meetings with Prime Minister Leterme, or when he tries to clarify to the Belgian media Obama's big options in Afghanistan. But also on smaller ones, by doing everything what can improve the relations between both countries. And then the business lawyer quickly surfaces again."

"Priceless illustration: the meeting with the Antwerp fashion kings Van Noten and Van Beirendonck, during which we were allowed to be a fly on the wall. Gutman keeps the diplomatic formalities very short, and cuts right to business. 'My wife says that it is ridiculous how little excellent Belgian couturiers are known in the U.S. and the other way around. What are we going to do to change that?' Van Beirendonck looks amused, Van Noten's gaze betrays skepticism. When Gutman without blinking an eye proposes to make a couple of phone calls to people he knows at major fashion magazines – he has to have a ridiculously well-filled blackberry – Van Noten says: 'But we may not complain at all about attention in Vogue and the like: they have helped to make us big in the States.'"

"Gutman however continues to monger tirelessly. He must and will be of service here. Is it realistic to draw fashion journalists coming for the Fashion Week to Paris for a couple of extra days to Belgium? No? When then?"

“Slowly you see Van Noten’s gaze change. This man is serious, you see him thinking, not merely with words of praise, but with deeds. Half an hour later the American Ambassador and the Antwerp fashion popes split with a head full of ideas and a first step towards practical arrangements. It is probably not the intention that we already spill all details here, but count on the defile of the graduates next year being special. And if over a couple of years a new Flemish fashion wave conquers the U.S. – or the other way around – we also will know with whose overdose yes we can-enthusiasm it all started.”

*(Note: the hard copy of the article contains a couple of more pictures, both from the event in Mechelen)*

### **INTERVIEW – “RATHER EFFECTIVE THAN DIPLOMATIC”**



*“INTERVIEW — HOWARD GUTMAN. Five minutes here, five minutes there: ambassador Gutman is a busy man, but with bits and pieces you do compile a serious interview.”*

Q: “I should speak very appreciatively of you, but you are not seen as a diplomat.”

Ambassador Gutman (smiles): “If I meet with Ministers, I apologize right away. If I was a better diplomat, we would today just have a coffee, I then say. Then we would see each other again in a month, and I would tell you a little about my background. In a month or four, you would know what my intentions are. But I am going to tell you that today already, because I am not such a good diplomat. We have stood still for eight years, with an American-Belgian relationship gone

sour. If we want to take on the recession, terrorism, the climate and our cultural relations, we do not have the luxury to lose much time. Let me be a mediocre diplomat, I prefer to be an effective ambassador.”

Q: “Amazing how many people you know well from how many different worlds, from George Clooney to Lance Armstrong. And you use that also professionally.”

Ambassador Gutman: “I call that creating synergies. I was a serious lawyer, trying to advise his clients on tough issues. People from politics, from the movie world, from sports: in the end you know a lot of people, and if those people are happy with you, you can engage one to help out the other at times. To the organizers of the Gent film festival I said: if you invite Americans like Andy Garcia or Kevin Costner once more, do tell me. Then I make sure that on other days they can meet other fun people, at a nice event at the Embassy or so. I would by the way love to set-up a full-blown Fourth of July event early July, with all sorts of activities having to do with the U.S. and American-Belgian relations. A Minister who comes to give a speech, a fashion show, a party, fireworks. Imagine that I also get Lance Armstrong to join; that would make an impression in this cycling country...”

Q: “You also write your speeches yourself.”

Ambassador Gutman: “My president also writes his speeches himself. I know that for a fact, already since the day that I first spoke with him. I had been working for seventeen months for the campaign for one of my best friends, Senator Mark Warner. When he quit the race in October 2006, I was tired. But on January 8, 2007, I was working in my office and the phone rang: Barack Obama. He said: I heard a lot of good about you from Mark Warner. I am going home tonight at 9:30 to write the speech in which I will announce my run for the presidency on Saturday. But if you come and see me for a moment, I will go home an hour later. If someone like Barack Obama asks you such a question, you go, out of respect, to listen. And he is good in persuading people.”

Q: “You know each other well. Just like Obama, you are younger than your predecessors, and you have a family.”

Ambassador Gutman: “There is a break in style with the past, yes. Of the 28 new ambassadors he has appointed, many are different and younger than usual. No child has been living in this house anymore since at least forty years. I have a son in high school and one who just started college. I am relatively young, I worked to earn a living, I paid off my mortgage, I drove around in a Toyota Selera, a...”

Q: “A fat business lawyer in a Toyota?”

Ambassador Gutman: “A fat lawyer who grew up in Queens. I washed dishes from my sixteenth. And as a lawyer I really did not need a big car. By the way, my wife did drive a fancier car, a Lexus. I just want to say: just like my colleagues in France, Spain, Switzerland, Austria – all friends from on the campaign trail – I am a family man and relatively young.”

Q: “Did you know Belgium already from before coming here?”

Ambassador Gutman: “Yes, I had already been here a couple of times. I even have gotten to know my wife Michelle during a trip through three European countries, including Belgium. That was in 1981. We have always traveled. I totally was into Belgium as a posting from the first moment on. First because we have a family. From where I live, we go on foot to the restaurant or the cinema. People are friendly. My children take public transport without having to fear something. We live here like normal people.”

“Secondly, Brussels tremendously reminds me of Washington. It is the eyes and the ears of Europe: everyone who counts is represented here. And after the election of Herman Van Rompuy to European President even more. That is why we have as a slogan now: ‘If you want to be heard, say it in Belgium’. Belgium is important, make no mistake.”

Q: “You played in a couple of movies and series, mostly as the lawyer. Is that hobby now completely over with?”

Ambassador Gutman: “If you become Ambassador, you need to stop all other professional activities. I had to quit my own law firm, and even a couple of boards of charity institutions. Also acting I need to leave aside in principle. Unless I can

convince my bosses in Washington that my acting work serves my job as an ambassador. Take that role in Fame. When I was visiting Molenbeek, they brought with a very multi-cultural group songs from Fame. Those school children found it terrific that I had played in that movie. For the premiere at my place I invited a couple of them. They were there together with stars from the movie, Princess Astrid's daughters, Pieter De Crem with his kids, and they all loved it together – whatever their background. Is that not a beautiful sample of diplomacy? That is why I hope to be able to make an exception from time to time. Hopefully already in March with the new Matthew McConaughey movie.”

Q: “When do you actually sleep?”

Ambassador Gutman: “The past two nights were the first two since I arrived in Belgium during which I slept over five hours. It was on doctor's order.”