

If anybody has lived the 'American Dream,' it is him. As son of an illegal immigrant, he became a top lawyer and an aide to Barack Obama from the first hour. For his commitment, he was selected for the ambassadorship to Brussels. A job which he executes in a very unique and innovative way. Meanwhile he also played in television series and movies. A talk with our charismatic American Ambassador Howard Gutman: 'anything that's fun and challenging is my ambition.'

Grete Cornelis

Despite an agenda that is heavily booked for his last months as ambassador in Brussels, Howard Gutman seems very relaxed. He feels perfectly comfortable in his role as liaison officer between the Belgian and the American people. First some issues had to be addressed as the relationship between the two countries, that once was so close after the two World Wars, had chilled under the Bush administration. But Gutman, with his straightforward style, charismatic flair and many city visits and media appearances, has succeeded in winning the hearts of the Belgians. He is one of the few, if not only, ambassadors that the mass audience knows by name. Howard Gutman loves Belgium and the feeling is mutual. He even seems a bit Belgian with his bright red Theo-glasses that give his warm expression even more radiance.

Father an Illegal immigrant

Howard Gutman is in fact a first generation American. His father was raised in a small village in Poland. He went through hard times during the Second World War. Howard Gutman: 'The city where my father came from had some 3,000 inhabitants of which some 1,600 were Jews. Only eleven survived the war. Eight of these eleven, including my father, survived by hiding in the forest for 27 months. The other three had hidden with relatives. After the war, he went searching for other survivors, but he could find no other members of his family who survived the Holocaust. Because he did not find any family members or work, he decided to emigrate to the United States. This was not easy as the US was working with quotas at that time, but eventually, he did succeed. He changed his name and with a fake passport, he arrived in the US in 1950: illegal, without any family, without money, without knowing English, without knowing anybody. The other survivors stayed behind but eventually spread all over the world.

So, in 1950 my father arrived in America. He married my mother, an American, in 1952. In '54 my sister was born, and I was born in '56. At home nobody spoke about what happened during the war. My father never shared his real name with us. I learned years later that his original name had been Gitman Mogilnicki. He had to change his name to be able to enter the United States and the immigration officer changed it into Max Gutman, and this is how I became Howard Gutman. He never used his real name anymore and he never talked about the past. I only got to know more about him after his death, about the years in the forest, about his sister that did not survive...But actually I only discovered most things fairly recently. In October 2012, 22 descendants of the eleven survivors from my father's village came together. They came from all over the world: from America, Australia, England, Canada, Israel. It was the first time that I had been to Poland and my father's village. It was a captivating and fascinating experience. I saw my grandmother's store, my father's house. There I discovered that the war's trauma still lives strongly in Poland. The Germans have had to deal with the trauma all these years, but in many Polish villages and cities, one can still strongly

feel the war's past, with a strong emotional significance. It also became emotional for me when the Mayor declared that the visit of our delegation—and particularly a visit of an American Ambassador—was the most important day in the history of the village.

There is only one generation that separates the man who had to hide in the woods to survive and the man that returned as the American Ambassador. In that sense, you can say that I have lived the American dream myself. But I am definitely not the only one. The Ambassador to the European Union, for example, is the great grandchild of a slave.

It is nice that people call it the 'American Dream' but I am convinced that you can live this dream everywhere. Also in Molenbeek, Charleroi, or Antwerp, even today in Tunisia, Egypt or wherever. The 'American Dream' is the dream that all parents have across the world for their children. That their children would have it better than themselves, that their future looks brighter. But in fact it's the same dream."

#### Lawyer and Actor

In 1973, when Gutman was 16, his father passed away. Strangely enough, this provided him the opportunity to continue his education. Because his father had died, the family income all of a sudden became zero and Gutman received a scholarship. He studied at Columbia University and then Harvard Law School, from which he graduated Magna Cum Laude. A career as a top lawyer ensued. In his free time and as a hobby, he was active in the Democratic party: writing speeches, advising on policy, helping with fundraising... This brought him into contact with many people, also from California, also in LA. Howard Gutman: "And that is how I got to play some small parts in films and series. Anything that seems fun, is my ambition. There are some things that I could never do – things that require innate talent, like being a great athlete or a great musician – but for other things, if you don't try, you will never know. " Among other things, Gutman can be seen as an actor in the remake of the movie Fame.

#### The Obama-effect

The many contacts within the Democratic party brought him to the highest echelons of national politics. When Obama chose to run for president, he wanted Gutman on his team, right at the time that Gutman himself had chosen not to support any candidates...

Howard Gutman: "I had just worked for a good friend of mine for 16 months, the governor of Virginia. He was investigating whether or not he would run. Eventually, he decided not to and I wasn't looking to support another candidate, as it had been a 16 grueling months. And then, it was January 2007, I received a phone call from Senator Barack Obama, whom I only knew by name. He told me that he had heard a lot of good things about me and wanted to talk to me. He was supposed to leave for home at nine thirty that evening to write the speech announcing that he was going to run, but if I could stop by, he promised to wait an hour longer. I did not want to help him, but the way he asked made me go anyway. I was determined to make clear to him that I was not going to work for him, but one hour with Obama can change all your plans.. I knew these types of talks, I knew what to expect. But what happened? The talk went completely differently than I had expected. During this hour, he not once tried to convince me to work for him. He talked about his ideas, his

ambitions, that it was not going to be an easy journey, that he was not the favorite candidate, that Senator Clinton was a strong opponent, that it would probably not be the smartest choice for me and that it could be difficult. He would even understand if I were to support Clinton. He was just himself: honest, tactical, sincere, realistic, intelligent. It was really special. And to my own surprise, I decided to support him because I really felt 'we could make this work.' After the talk, I called my wife and told her that I was going to actively support Barack Obama, 'the next President of the United States.' Her answer was a question: 'Is America ready for a black president?' At that time, it dawned on me that during the entire hour with Obama it did not once come to my mind that he was black. Race disappears when you talk to Obama, it doesn't matter. In America, you do not receive the nomination from within your party. You have to play the social media, appear on television. And I knew that Americans, if they get the chance to know him, would vote for Obama, because he was unique."

But what makes Obama so unique? Is he an outsider or a typical product of the American melting pot? Howard Gutman: "Obama cannot be considered an outsider because there are no outsiders in the United States. You cannot figure out what background someone has in America, because everybody is a product of immigration, and diversity is commonplace. America consists of 300 million individuals, linked by one thing: the love for America. This diversity is not a weakness, on the contrary. You would have never thought in early 2007 that a black man would be elected president the following year. The same goes for Latinos. Of course, there will at some point be a Latino president. It is a possibility that it might happen 30 years from now, or during the next elections.

What makes Obama so unique as a human being and so strong as a president is what I call his 'zero blood pressure.' Look at him when he is delivering a speech. You might see him move his arms, but his suit never creases. He is so rational, so motivated, so thoughtful, so smart. Even during an exhausting political campaign, amid battles between Democrats and Republicans on the budget or health insurance, and international pressures...he continues to be in complete control. If he had not won the elections, all of his staff would have been very upset. But not him. 'We tried our best, but we did not make it,' would have been his response."

Democracy is not efficient

Still, the President's challenges are not small. Health care reform for example, an issue that the Clintons were unable to pass. For us, Belgians, it is incomprehensible that in America, the question of mandatory health insurance is controversial.

Howard Gutman: "What Belgians do not realize is that Belgium is the most united country in the world. You laugh? Look at America, where about 50 percent of the voters are Democrats and about 50 percent are Republicans. The first 50 percent voted for Obama, supports mandatory health insurance, women's rights, climate measures, and good transatlantic relationship, and wants tougher gun laws. The second 50 percent did not support Obama and believes that mandatory health insurance and tougher gun laws limit freedom. They believe that climate measures should not be expanded. These are the two streams in America that you need to respect.

Compare this to Belgium. Here everybody, from Bart De Wever to Elio Di Rupo, agrees on all of these major issues. Everybody agrees on these major themes. But both countries are democracies and democracy is a fantastic system. We can always have a debate about anything. We can disagree on many things, but the question is of course what one does with these differences of opinion? Everybody can voice his opinion, newspapers and TV-programs fill their pages and broadcasts with them. But this is the power of democracy. Democracy is not easy and not efficient. But that is its beauty. If you want efficiency, if you want to make health insurance mandatory and do so quickly, then you need a system like the one in totalitarian countries. Compare this to your 541 days that it took to form a government, and look at the Middle East, there people die every day because they are trying to achieve more democracy.”

The U.S. received a significant blow following the events on 9/11. Has America been able to cope with these events? Howard Gutman: “Not only America, but the entire world changed on 9/11. Caution and prudence are prominent in the world. No matter where you are, after 9/11 everybody realizes that you are vulnerable everywhere. America needed to review the way in which it viewed security. More caution was introduced and safety is paramount. . But I am convinced that America has recovered from these attacks. America is once again looking into the future and examining how peace can be stimulated. America has changed but has not become less. And Hillary Clinton and Obama’s policies played an important role in this.”

Belgium on top

It is Obama’s presidency that eventually delivered the position of Ambassador to Gutman. After the grueling election campaign and President Obama’s inauguration, Gutman was named for an ambassador position.

Howard Gutman; “In America you have two kinds of Ambassador. You have the career diplomats that make their way through the diplomatic service and you have some 35 ambassadors whom the president names himself based on merit. When I made that list, I did my best to make sure that I would get Belgium. Belgium was our ‘best fit.’ We have two children, one of them was sixteen at the time and was still in high school. I was thus looking for a country with good schools, a country where my wife would feel comfortable, a country with a nice lifestyle. I also found that Brussels’ international character, with the NATO and the EU, was much like Washington where we had come from. The international flair was really appealing to us. So we moved, together with our youngest son who studied at the International School. Our eldest son was in college at that time, so he stayed in America and benefited from the best of both worlds. He is probably the only American who regularly follows the Red Devils and Anderlecht games, for which two Americans play, among others, Sacha Kljestan.”

The Gutmans are truly enjoying their time in Belgium, which they already knew from their trips to Europe. Only the youngest suffered some home sickness and missed his friends. Is there nothing that the Ambassador misses from his home country? “Yes,” Gutman laughs, “a good Chinese restaurant. Whenever I return to the States, I always order a great Chinese meal the first evening, but after that I am ready to return to Belgium.”

Gutman performs his ambassadorship in a very special way. He is convinced that the Belgians were looking for a reason to love the United States again after the Bush years. The victory of charismatic Obama provided them with this opportunity. And Gutman adds another layer to this. Of course his meetings with government officials and with political, economic, and business leaders are important, but Gutman also wants to be in touch with the average Flemish, Walloon, or person from Brussels. He wants to learn our languages and takes lessons daily, alternating French and Dutch. He also started his 'One Belgium' tour in which he set out to visit all 589 official communes and towns of Belgium. Today, he only needs to visit one last commune in order to complete his promise. Howard Gutman: "the tour is almost finished and I want to wrap it up with an event which includes everybody that should be present at such a 'One Belgium' Tour: the Prime Minister, the ten province governors, and the 589 mayors. Which commune did I leave for last? Voeren." With the completion of his Belgian tour, the end of his ambassadorship is also approaching. It will be a goodbye that will not be permanent, if it depends on Gutman. "I hope to return here often, for business and friends. I already have a number of weddings in my agenda, for which I will cross the ocean. But, I am also hoping to return professionally because I would like to work in international and business consulting on the relationship between Europe and America." Does Gutman have a message for the country that he will soon leave? Howard Gutman: "Of course, 'We can never go back again.' No matter who the ambassador is, who is in the White House, never can two countries which enjoy such a strong bond let go of each other again. We, Americans and Belgians, value democracy, freedom, and justice. We also want the same things: a nice family, a good job, nice friends and a happy life."