

Ambassador in Walcourt & Philippeville

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“Welcome Mr. Ambassador”

“On Friday, U.S. Ambassador Howard Gutman visited Philippeville and Walcourt. The U.S. diplomat wants to know other Belgian cities than Brussels.

“It is Walcourt that had the honor of being the first to welcome Howard Gutman, who has been U.S. Ambassador to Belgium for two years. His objective is to visit as many Belgian cities as possible, especially via meeting with locally elected officials.

“It was 11 a.m. and Walcourt mayor Mrs. Poulain and a couple of aldermen were waiting the diplomat’s arrival with great impatience. The Ambassador was a few minutes late, but it was not a problem.

“Mr. Gutman then arrived. Smiling, he quickly began talking with the mayor, who turned out to have perfect English. It was a friendly conversation and Mr. Gutman explained the reason for these city visits. ‘I do one or two a week, which enables me to meet with Belgians in their home towns and to better know the country in which I am. I have visited more than 200 cities so far. With this pace of at least one city per week, I will soon have visited all Belgium,’ the Ambassador pointed out.

“The Ambassador, 53, is a personal friend of Obama. This is to what he owes his appointment. In the United States, the new President appoints those he thinks capable of representing the U.S. abroad among people who are close to him. Howard Gutman is a lawyer, but he is also interested in culture, in the economy, and of course in Belgian politics. His questions were mostly about the regional economy and its impact on the population.

“Being of Jewish religion, Mr. Gutman was very interested in the visit of the church in Walcourt. He was interested in the stained-glass windows and by various sculptures. During these visits, delay is rarely caught up. Having arrived 30 minutes late in Walcourt, the Ambassador was one hour late in Philippeville. Very

patient, Mayor Jacques Rousselle was still in a good mood awaiting the Ambassador. Unfortunately, the Ambassador and his staff arrived at the city hall via the bad entrance. Indeed, for parking reasons, the Ambassador entered via the back door!

“After enjoying the view of the main square from the city hall, the Ambassador was invited to a drink. In a few words, the mayor explained the economic and social situation of his city.

“With his well-known sense of humor, the mayor pointed out that ‘Belgium is one of the rare countries where people vote and where no Government is being formed.’ He added that, ‘in the United States and although there are many States, they do a better job.’ The Ambassador said he understands the situation and, without any mischievousness, added that ‘I know, Bart De Wever explained it to me.’

“Everyone knows that n one visits Philippeville without also visiting its undergrounds. It is the alderman Bruno Berlemont who guided the Ambassador in the city’s undergrounds.’