

“After Belgium, no country is good enough.”

Howard Gutman (56) will step down as US ambassador and will leave politics.

By Jesse Regenmortel

While Barack Obama is starting his second term as President of the United States, Howard Gutman embarks on his last six months as US Ambassador to Belgium. He will be replaced in July. “My bosses believe that I am getting to attached to this country.”

“It will hurt to leave Belgium behind,” says Howard Gutman in the sitting room of his typically Brussels residence. Typically American courtesy at first glance; but Gutman genuinely means it. “For four years, Belgium was my home. I have made friends here for four years.”

Such as Herman and Geertrui Van Rompuy. “I celebrated New Years eve with them. But then I was not *Mr. Ambassador* and Van Rompuy was not *Mr. President of Europe*. We were just a group of friends. We were wearing party hats and had party horns in our mouths, *god forbid*. “

But after the American national holiday, on the fourth of July, Howard Gutman will leave, because the US State Department deems this necessary. “I am accused of being too attached to this country. *(laughs)* No Seriously, an ambassador’s term lasts three years. I served four. With this I will be the second longest serving Ambassador to Belgium since World War One. And I am proud of this.”

Visiting All Communes

Normally, the tradition is that leaving Ambassadors will afterwards serve in a different country, but Gutman has (not yet) been asked. “The problem is that when you have been an Ambassador to Belgium, few jobs seem politically appealing. So after the summer I will start working in the private sector: giving speeches, consulting businessmen. But all depends on who wants to employ me. And if nobody wants me, I can always become a lawyer again.”

There is only one thing that Gutman wants to achieve at all cost as Ambassador. That is to complete his tour of Belgium. In 2009, he took it upon himself to visit all 589 Belgian communes. Only one remains.

“That is Voeren. And it is no coincidence. Everybody knows that there are tensions between Flanders and Wallonia. And Voeren has played an important part in this. It

seems appropriate to end my tour of the communes there, because I want to show to Belgians that you are more united than you think.”

“In my country 50 percent of the population supports Obama and 50 percent opposes him. In Belgium 98 percent of people support Obama. Everybody in this country agrees on the grand societal issues: healthcare, the right to choose, climate change and gay rights. Take New York and Texas. They are much further apart than Flanders and Wallonia. Belgium is the most united country I know, but you don’t realize it enough.”

In the places where Gutman has already visited, he sometimes stood with his mouth wide open in amazement. “Take the Carnival in Aalst for example. I was on an official visit to the town. Together with Mayor Ilse Uyttersprot, a dedicated leader, I watched the carnival parade. And what did I see on the first float that came by: an enormous statue of the Mayor naked. Now I know Uyttersprot’s story (*editor’s note: She was filmed while having sex on vacation on top of a tower*), but you cannot expect something like this in the United States.

That Belgian humor, the country’s surreal edge: Gutman believes it is fantastic. But he continues to wrestle with the languages. “I have been following language lessons from the first day I arrived: French and –even more difficult – Dutch. Take the following sentence for example: ‘*Haar haar is blond*’ (Her hair is blond). How do I know which *haar* means the hair and which *haar* means the woman? I still can’t figure it out. And the one true way to learn a language is to be immersed in it. But I am the American Ambassador: everybody that I meet speaks to me in English.”

Fantastic Speech

It is one of his tasks in Belgium: receiving important people during important events. The latest event was the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama last Monday. “I was not able to witness it live in Washington. Four years ago I was able to. I was standing right behind the president. One of the most important moments in my life.”

This week Obama once again delivered a speech that was praised worldwide. “Once again it was fantastic. Although I could predict the responses in advance: the Belgians would love it, the Democrats would love it, and the Republicans would not find themselves in it. The speech was a bit too partisan for the American public.”

Belgians Understand the Love of Guns

“Barack Obama is different from the other politicians that I have met. He says what he says, not because someone else wants to hear it, but because he means it. He does what he thinks he has to do.” This is also the case for gun laws. Obama wants to strengthen them at all cost, despite strong opposition. Because Americans love their guns, a love that is often not understood in Europe.

“Still, I believe Belgians understand the love of guns. Hunting is popular here isn’t it? In the fall, there is boar, deer and pheasant on the menu. Being able to hunt, to shoot: for some it is important that they have the freedom to do this. Because of this, I can understand that many Americans demand the right to bear arms. But we have to regulate gun ownership better in a time when children are murdered and illegal guns are everywhere. And Obama will succeed in this too.”