

## **Interview of Ambassador Howard Gutman in *Paris-Match* of July 5, 2012**

*Caption in the upper-left-hand corner :*

“Howard Gutman received us in his residence together with his wife Michelle. A surgical-dentist, she is also a true lover of fashion who organizes events showcasing Belgian and American fashion designers.”

### **“The Man Close to Obama who Loves Belgium so Much”**

U.S. Ambassador in the capital of Europe, Howard Gutman makes an unprecedented portrait of our flat country.

A brilliant lawyer, Howard Gutman was appointed Ambassador to Belgium by Barack Obama and was confirmed by the U.S. Senate on July 24, 2009. After graduating from prestigious Universities – Harvard and Columbia – he was Special Assistant of FBI Director William Webster, focusing on anti-terrorism and counter-intelligence. He worked at the U.S. Supreme Court and also worked in a prestigious Washington law firm where, among other dossiers, he dealt with the fight against organized crime. He was an advisor of Democratic Party candidates and took part in the 2008 campaign of Barack Obama. He had done us the favor of granting us his first interview at the beginning of his mandate, and now, three years after his arrival in Belgium, he made a balance sheet of his stay for *Paris-Match*. The vision he has of Belgium is often surprising.

### **A budding actor, the role he prefers is visiting Belgian communes**

Howard Gutman is someone special and a genuine self-made man. Coming from a family of Polish emigrants, he grew up in the very popular Queens borough in New York. His successful career, his acute and innovative mind, and his fresh look on things made him a very special star. He also performed a few movie roles ‘for the fun of it’ in a few Hollywood movies. He for instance was Tim Robbins’ lawyer in the movie ‘Noise’ and also played a lawyer in the ‘K Street’ series on HBO. During the first interview he granted us in 2009, he was looking forward to the release of the remake of ‘Fame’ in which he played the dad of a high school boy. His enthusiasm, his energy, and a genuine sense for statements that hit the nail on the head charmed Barack Obama, who made him a proposal one cannot refuse: representing the United States in the capital of Europe.

When he arrived in Belgium, the new U.S. Ambassador set a mission for himself which was typical of him, i.e. meeting Belgians in all the country's 589 communes. This 'City Trip Initiative' was an ambitious objective which has almost been met. Indeed, he has already visited more than 440 communes, as shown in an accounting which he keeps with the greatest care in an approach that is both pragmatic and fun. From a visit to the biscuits manufacturer Lotus in Lembeke, InBev in Louvain, the carnival of Malmedy, or the Cat Throwing festivities in Ieper, Howard Gutman has taken the pulse of the flat country and has greatly enjoyed all our local folklore. His pilgrimage was made with an improvement of U.S.-Belgian relations in mind. He also kept an important place in his extremely busy agenda for the interfaith dialogue, organizing for instance an interfaith celebration for peace at the Saint Michel and Gudule Cathedral to commemorate the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on September 11 of last year.

In this gigantic work aiming at improving the American image and helped by the fervor for Obama, Howard Gutman proved to be a unifier and a diplomat, of course, but never beating around the bush when asked a question. A genuine lawyer, he perfectly demonstrated that he would also be an excellent Ambassador of Belgium.

### **'Barack Obama Shares the Belgian Values'**

Q: after three years of your mandate, what balance sheet do you make of the U.S.-Belgian relations?

Ambassador Gutman: When we got here, I pledged to rebuild the Belgian-American partnership. Before we arrived, it was not easy to be an American in Europe. In 2007 for instance, and according to a poll by Gallup International, the Belgian vision of the American leadership was 7 percent favorable and 65 percent unfavorable. So we knew we had work to do but we knew that we represented a President who shares the same values as Belgium. We just had to reach the people. A new study was published about a month ago. At the request of Meridian International, they polled 140 countries around the world. And which country finished first for the highest gain in favorability? Belgium. The number of favorable opinions has considerably increased and is now two against one, i.e. 46 percent favorable and 22 percent unfavorable.

Q : Why do you think the U.S. image was so negative? You mentioned the fact that not many Americans were 'visible' in Brussels.

Ambassador Gutman: I explained that many Americans were hesitant to show that they were American because of the negative view that Belgium had of our country. But President Obama shares Belgian values. We believe in climate, in human rights, and in security. Belgians and Americans for instance worked together in Afghanistan and in Libya. We believe in the Transatlantic relationship. It is an important partnership.

Q : Back to Belgian-American relations, Laurette Onkelinx recently criticized the U.S. for asking too much in the field of anti-terrorism information. It was even mentioned that the U.S. might reinstate the visa requirement. There is always that battle between security and privacy. What is exactly the situation?

Ambassador Gutman: Belgium and the United States have worked wonderfully together on balancing anti-terrorism and protecting privacy. We share very similar views and we work very well together on these issues. I have every confidence that we will continue to cooperate together in the same manner.

Q : Was the reaction of some politicians misinterpreted?

Ambassador Gutman: I have talked to all Belgian Ministers, i.e. Di Rupo, Reynders, Turtelboom, and Milquet and I never had any disagreement on that balance between anti-terrorism and protection of privacy. We have reached an agreement and we are going to negotiate the next one. Until now, we have never reached the stage where one side is refusing to sign, never. We were waiting for the formation of a new Government. Then, the recent visit by the Secretary of State focused on Afghanistan. Belgium and the United States were totally on the same wavelength to conclude agreements on aid to Afghanistan and civil reconstruction. We are getting now to the negotiation on this agreement and we have no substantive disagreement. The Belgian Government can simply not devote 100 percent of its time to this, but no one has told me about substantive disagreements, neither on Afghanistan before nor now on privacy.

Q : Belgium has the reputation of being the country of compromise. Do you sometimes think that things move too slowly?

Ambassador Gutman: I must tell you that my country can sometimes experience stalemates. We had a very difficult time getting a budget passed because of politics. I have not seen anything similar in Belgium. On Libya, Belgium was much faster than we were. Belgium was in Libya before we were!

Q : So, you went to meet Belgians in their own cities and towns...

Ambassador Gutman: Yes, and during those visits, we were able to see three things that always surprise us. First, the reaction of people could not be friendlier. Secondly, cities and villages have magic. You can go anywhere in Belgium, turn a corner, and you will always immediately find a church and a town square. Thirdly, there is folklore, and traditions and a sense of history, with carnivals, festivals, etc. People throw a lot of food! Oranges, nuts in Bastogne, or cats in Ieper!

Q : You have probably seen more of the Belgian folklore than the average Belgian.

Ambassador Gutman: Probably. Ask people from the North for instance if they know the Doudou, and it is not always the case. Yet, it is a wonderful festivity. Similarly, I wonder if someone from the South has ever seen the cay throwing in Ieper. Most of the time they do not know about it. This year was our third participation at the Doudou. We were there with the Prime Minister. At the Doudou, there is a huge crowd, pushing and pushing, but it is all peaceful. Di Rupo and Justine Henin were in the middle of a sea of tens of thousands people. This crowd was surrounding the Prime Minister and the latter did not have any bodyguard. Can you imagine other world leaders in that situation? I was looking at them and I was telling myself ‘this is not possible, they are going to be crushed!’ Aside from the folklore, what you can see in these cities and communes are businesses, museums, culture, and officials dedicated to their job, I have not seen a place where things did not work.

Q : You talked about President Obama, and you once said that, if he were a country, he would be Belgium...

Ambassador Gutman: Because President Obama has a certain calm and a certain modesty but, at the same time, he has a huge competence. You know, he has no blood pressure. He is the only person I have met who has that characteristic. Whichever way he moves his arms, his suit never wrinkles. It is always just perfect. It seems that he moves by gliding and, to some extent, Belgium also glides.

Q : This is a surprising image that Belgians do not necessarily have of themselves. On the contrary, we sometimes have the image of being rather heavy. But it seems clear that Belgians have that low profile attitude which you mentioned. Is this a real asset in your eyes?

Ambassador Gutman: Of course. This is the Obama style again. What is the need to shout everywhere that you own a business? ‘It is better to own it than to shout about it! This is how Belgians operate.

Q : This being said, it is also an asset that can sometimes become a shortcoming. When a Belgian begins to be successful, he must necessarily move abroad if he wants to really succeed...

Ambassador Gutman: Belgians can laugh to themselves because they know what they are doing and because they are aware that they do things well. That is why they do not need to shout everywhere that they are successful, because they know they are. They can argue about things that may seem small in my country because, generally speaking, they manage to work and live together. I say – and Belgians never understand this – that Belgium is a very united country. If you look at the United States on issues such as health care, woman's choice, transatlantic relations, or climate, you will find 30 percent of opinions in favor, 30 percent against, and 40 percent in the middle. Yet, on all essential issues, Belgians are together. So, sometimes they can argue just as loudly about a shopping mall or about the difference between a bridge and a tunnel in Antwerp, but on the essential, they agree.

Q : Do you think we make too much ado about our linguistic tensions?

Ambassador Gutman: I have never seen two Belgians who were unable to communicate. They speak in French, in Dutch, and sometimes in English. They switch from one language to the other sometimes without realizing it. Most of the time, they speak two or three languages. In my country, I am convinced that the average is one language. You cannot fault Belgians for their language skills.

Q : Didn't the fact that they sometimes need to communicate in English appear absurd to you?

Ambassador Gutman: The key is to communicate. When I went to Afghanistan, there were French, German, Dutch, Canadian, and American troops. The Belgians were always in the middle, making sure that everybody understood each other. If you want to have the essence of communications, come to Belgium!

Q : Your mandate so far has been especially dynamic. You were very creative during the economic mission of Crown Prince Philippe to the United States in June of 2011. Besides, we have heard about your country as we had never before in Belgium. President Obama has talked to Belgians on several occasions, such as when he offered his sympathy to the families of the victims of the bus accident in Sierre. You are probably a key player behind this.

Ambassador Gutman: When we have a tragic loss like the death of these schoolchildren who were victim of that bus accident, we are all going to express our sorrow and mourn together. And I know that the President will want to express his condolences and sympathy.

Q : Is it certain that the President will come if he is reelected?

Ambassador Gutman: Actually, President Obama was supposed to come to Belgium during the second half of 2010 when Belgium had the rotating EU Presidency. But there was the Government crisis and we waited for a new Belgian Government during six months. He met Herman Van Rompuy in Lisbon. We agreed with the Belgian caretaker Government that he had to meet with the new Government. Since he could not come during the Belgian EU Presidency, I went back to Washington in February for a one on one meeting with the President to talk about Belgium, because he wanted to be informed about the country. You are publishing the picture of that meeting. Look at my face: you can see that I am very enthusiastic and that the President, who has no blood pressure, is always serene.

Q : If he is reelected, are you sure that coming to Brussels will be one of his priorities?

Ambassador Gutman: He cannot travel before the election because he must focus on the campaign. The Prime Minister asked him during the NATO Summit whether he would come and he replied that, if he is reelected, he will come. I know that he appreciates all what Belgium has done.

Q : During a conference in Brussels, you were criticized for linking anti-Semitism throughout the world and Israel's policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. That statement upset some Republicans and created some commotion in the campaign. What happened exactly?

Ambassador Gutman: It was during a speech I was giving to the Jewish community. What I said was misquoted.

Q : Was it a misunderstanding?

Ambassador Gutman: No, a mistake in the way I was quoted. When you give more than 100 speeches a year and when you are rather high profile, it is unavoidable that, at some point, some things get misquoted. The concern was to know whether I had said something against the Jewish community. But as soon as people were able to see the full speech, leaders of the Jewish community, including in Washington, considered that there was no problem.

Q : But given your personal engagement, you were perhaps entitled to make such a comment?

Ambassador Gutman: In no way did I make a negative comment about the Jewish community. People who know me have confirmed it. My Government has always been a close friend of the Jewish community. I have a 55-year career as a great and dedicated friend of that community. This has ended the debate.

Q : From the beginning of your mandate here, you had the nice idea of bringing the religious communities together, for instance via interfaith receptions.

Ambassador Gutman: I think that Europe's struggles should integrate a diversity that allows one to maintain one's identity, because you must build a house out of diverse elements. In my life, my career, and my education, I have always been close to the Jewish community. I have participated in dozens and dozens of events. I have also attended numerous masses. I think that I have prayed more than anyone else, ever! Masses represent an important part of a society's life. It helped me with my languages. I have prayed to God the Almighty and the Holy Ghost in both French and Dutch. But the outreach to the Muslim community is critical. We are rebuilding East-West relations just like we are rebuilding the transatlantic relationship. There is a Muslim youth in Belgium that can be reached. On the side of the Jewish community in Antwerp for instance, everyone has known me for years. But now I am also well known among the Muslim community as someone who brings people together. We brought here, to my residence, Rabbis, Imams, and representatives of all faiths.

Q : What do you think Belgium should do more in that respect ?

Ambassador Gutman: Some people are doing this very well. Philippe Moureaux is a hero in Molenbeek. When I go to this commune, I can see that all the time. But diversity is an evolutionary process. Belgium is doing a fine job in favor of that diversity, it has found an equilibrium between diversity and the need to remain vigilant vis-à-vis extremisms. One must integrate those who want to be part of the brotherhood of your society. This is what we are working on together.

Q : Did Belgium appear to you more divided on the religious field than on others?

Ambassador Gutman: Things that can be perceived as weird at the beginning gradually become familiar. It is probably easier for me to adapt myself since I am coming from a country where diversity is the norm. My father came from Poland and did not speak a word of English when he arrived in the United

States. Michelle's parents come from Russia and Austria. I grew up in Queens, an environment where there were Italians, Irish, Jewish people, and Catholic people, but no Protestants, whereas that community represents 80 percent of the American population. This shows how this environment was special. I did not meet a Protestant until I went to secondary school. When I was 6 or 7, I heard that John Kennedy was the first Catholic President. I then thought that all the other Presidents, Abraham Lincoln like George Washington, must have been Jewish. In other words, I grew up in a working class suburb. Most of the inhabitants were butchers, bakers, and blue collar workers. It was a very diverse society which for me was the norm.

Q : You have had contacts with the Belgian King and Princes. What is your look on the Belgian Monarchy and on the system in general?

Ambassador Gutman: We are coming from a country where the closest thing to monarchy we have is George Clooney! Because, of course, we do not have the same type of history. But everyone needs institutions, role models, and icons. Everyone has a role to play. We have our own icons. They can be movie stars or sports heroes, but they are part of the wonder. And if British people bring one million people to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee, it is wonderful, it is part of a country's charms. Royalty is part of the wonder. Look at the success of the British wedding last year. It was wonderful, perhaps comparable to a major Hollywood series. We need things that bring societies together. We do not need to constantly disagree on defense or economic topics, we have also the right to celebrate. And Royalty plays an important role for that.

Q : Honestly, as an American, don't you view these traditions as a bit old-fashioned?

Ambassador Gutman: Many British people attended the Jubilee standing in the rain. I do not think that these people belong to the past. They were enjoying the current moment. We were invited to watch that ceremony by the British Ambassador and we had a heck of a good time. I drank too much Pimm's. I actually told them that Pimm's might be at the origin of the American revolution! Let's also think about the 540 days Belgium spent without a Government. We knew that the King was continuing to work and to try to form a Government. And in the end the politicians worked everything out.

Q : If Barack Obama is reelected, are you going to stay in Belgium?

Ambassador Gutman: A normal tour is three years. A career Ambassador would leave in July. In August, we will have been three years in Belgium. I am the U.S. Ambassador who has served the longest time in Belgium (sic.) We have



been asked to try to stay in order to finish what we have been doing in case of reelection. This could take us to next spring. Michelle's parents are now over 90 and my youngest son who has spent three years here with us and was attending the International School of Brussels has just left for the United States to prepare to go to the Columbia University. We thought we would go back with him when he would leave Belgium. With a little bit of luck and God's help, if Michelle's parents and our son are doing fine, if everyone is doing ok in the U.S., and if Obama is reelected, we will then stay until the spring or the summer of 2013. If he is not reelected, I will submit my resignation because a new President would have the right to have someone who represents him and who would be fully part of his team.

Q : What do you intend to do after this?

Ambassador Gutman: Working as a consultant, working on international projects, which would enable me to keep regular contacts with Belgium.

Q : Are you going to be an actor again?

Ambassador Gutman: I received two proposals while I was here. One was the role as a judge in 'The Lincoln Lawyer' with Matthew McConaughey. This would have been a non-paid job – the money was to go to a Belgian-American charity – but in spite of this the State Department did not want an Ambassador to play in a movie. In the future, I will be able to that for the fun of it, as a hobby. Besides, I have been asked to give a couple of speeches. Between the various international projects and sitting on a board or two, we will have the opportunity of traveling and of seeing our Belgian friends again.

Q : What has impressed you the most in Belgium so far?

Ambassador Gutman: Belgians are impressive in many fields. Government officials know the issues and know the country very well. They are very well informed. The only thing they do not know is baseball! But talk about Camp David to Herman Van Rompuy and he will talk about Eisenhower at Camp David. As I said, Belgians are smart. Belgian businessmen seem to be very quiet. But if you look at the list of the leading producers in various sectors throughout the world, very often it is a Belgian. You will find Belgians at the helm of huge businesses in China or in the United States, and always with the usual discretion. As for sports people, for instance, Kim Clijsters is fantastic. She is probably the most popular Belgian sports personality in the U.S.

Q : During our first interview, you told us you had discovered the Belgian coast, and Knokke in particular, and you wondered why on earth such a resort like Knokke was not selling itself better. Do you still have that opinion?

Ambassador Gutman: I spoke with the mayor of Knokke and I told him: ‘no one knows what a jewel you have!’ His reply was: ‘I know, it is on purpose!’ You can go to Put 19, a pub in Knokke, to have a coffee or a beer on tap after the Sunday Church service and you can meet with everybody. I can do more business there than in Brussels. I see the Minister of Defense and prominent businessmen and all this in a friendly atmosphere. This is what they are looking for in Knokke. They do not need Chinese or Russian tycoons. If you have crowds of tourists who come, you can no longer have a tea at the golf club, no longer have a beer at Put 19, and you can no longer go and quietly buy a pastry. People in Knokke want to keep all this for themselves. It is the Belgian approach and it works perfectly well. Very often, we were unable to find a hotel room – even the mayor did not succeed! We can stay with friends but there is then the security question, since I also need a room for my security.

Q : If there is something you could have changed, would you have canceled that security detail?

Ambassador Gutman: I would probably have done three things. I would have taken part of the fabulous light that you have in June and I would have added to the month of February when it is so dark. I would also open a few American-Chinese restaurants here. By the way, there is something I’d like to tell Belgians: curry is not a Chinese dish! Lastly, I would indeed want to live on a planet where we could move around without security guards.

Q : You, an American, have become an expert on European soccer!

Ambassador Gutman: My eldest son has been a big fan of Chelsea for ten years. No one knew about soccer in the U.S. except him! Chelsea has signed up Belgian players and he is following this with passion. I am now following the Belgian national team. I know Standard pretty well because there was an American player in the team but Anderlecht now also has an American player, Sacha Kljestan, who is a friend of ours. And I am following the Belgian basketball competition which includes many American players. I have met Ann Wauters, the best Belgian basketball player who has signed up with the Seattle Storm team. Of course, we follow the Tour de France. We have friends who are big fans of cycling and I ride with them for time to time. We are also going to the racetrack of Waregem twice a year for the American Day and to see races in general, which gives my wife an opportunity to wear a hat!