

588 out of the 589 communes have already enjoyed a visit of the American Ambassador Howard Gutman. Tomorrow will be his last: Voeren. For four years he looked at our country with eyes wide open. “I don’t know a single country that is as united as yours. And I have enjoyed every second of it.”

Koen Baumers, Het Nieuwsblad 05/04/2013

Sometimes he even had to ring doorbells in order to speak to inhabitants, but he did it. Tomorrow the American Ambassador Howard Gutman will visit his 589th and last Belgian commune. And no, it is no coincidence that it will be the facility commune Voeren. In the 1980s, the inhabitants of Voeren were still fighting in the streets, but now it has become a peaceful commune.

If there is one thing Howard Gutman noticed during his visits from De Panne to Maaseik and from Oostende to Arlon, it is that power lies within unity. “The difference between someone from Oklahoma and someone from Brooklyn,” he says, while spreading his arms open wide, “is so much greater than the difference between someone from Flanders and someone from Wallonia.”

In order to continue with his hands on top of each other: “whether it is Bart De Wever or Elio Di Rupo, everybody here supports the same basic principles. During the last elections, some 98 percent of Belgians would have voted for Obama. Everybody here supports the right to choose for women, universal healthcare, gay marriage, strict gun laws, respect for the environment... Americans always have a hard time believing that you can be 541 days without a government with parties that all share the same democratic values. When you look at Belgium from the outside, you see the most united nation in the world.”

Gutman also wanted to fulfill a mission with his tour of Belgium: the alleviation of the tensions between America and Belgium from during the Bush era. “When I arrived here in Belgium there were eight people against America for each supporter. Now there are two supporters for each opponent.”

Mission accomplished. “Although of course, this is especially due to a man named Barack Obama.” On the 23 of July, Gutman’s mission will be completely concluded.

‘People Even Recognize Me In My Swimsuit.’

Howard Gutman is systematically surrounded by a small army of security agents. “This has nothing to do with me or America, it is the host country that determines the security measures. In Europe most countries believe that American and Israeli ambassadors need strict security. When I moved to Belgium, I had to promise that I would not leave the door without security. I went to a Standaard soccer game a few times with Yves Leterme when he was still Prime Minister. I had four security agents with me, he had none. I would have thought that he would need them more than I do, but that’s just the way it is.

“It has happened on occasion that my wife and I have snuck out on a Sunday morning to drink a coffee in a café (laughs). In disguise of course. But sometimes I can go drink a cup of coffee in a hooded sweater and a baseball cap instead of a tie and my red glasses. And I am still recognized then. I once walked into a coffee and the barman said: “Hey, aren’t you the American Ambassador?”

If word gets out of such a secret outing, the head of security will schedule an appointment to see me. I then ask my secretary if he is coming to yell at me. *Yes*, she then says. I would then cancel the appointment, saying I am too busy, and would keep a low profile for some months. “They recognize me everywhere. It even happened to me on a train in Thailand and on the beach in the Canary Islands. Belgians came to me because they recognized me in my swim suit with sunscreen on.

The Country of Difficult Languages

Another challenge for Gutman: our languages. “I decided to learn both languages as soon as I arrived. When I listened to speeches by Annemie Turtelboom and Caroline Gennez in Mechelen, I did not understand a word. I have taken language lessons every day, alternating Dutch and French, but I am disappointed in how bad I still am. Now when I listen to speeches, I understand most of what is said, even though I still have to every now and then ask why people are laughing. But if I had to speak it myself... I once had to give a speech completely in French. The first three to four minutes went fine. After 5 minutes, people started looking above my head to the screen with the text and after 10 minutes people were reading with their ears

covered. Dutch is even harder. The syntax of your sentences (in Dutch): *Ik zie niet graag mensen die pijn hebben. I see not well people that pain have.* If you had given me three hours, I wouldn't have been able to form this sentence on my own.

The Craziest Country in the World

In my first year here I was at the Aalst Carnival; what an experience. I was sitting next to the mayor (then Ilse Uyttersprot) watching the parade. There comes the first float: a gigantic naked mayor. I thought: Oh no, I can't look at her. The second float had Defense Minister Pieter De Crem in a ballerina Tutu. It is not ideal for me to be seen with this, because the US and Belgian defense work very close together. I covered my face to avoid pictures, but the float stopped right in front of my nose.

Like the Ku Klux Klan

"I witnessed the most scary moment in Stavelot in the pitch dark basement of the abbey. During the carnival people line up at both sides of the basement in white sheets with white hoods and torches in their hands. *Wha wha wha*, they said. I come from America and we have a history with the Ku Klux Klan. Oh my god, I thought. Even my Belgian bodyguards were scared."

Belgium's Belly Button

'My visit to Buggenhout was very surprising. They have a statute that marks the middle of Flanders and a sheet was draped over part of it. *Take it off*, said the mayor. And there was a picture of me and my wife. It was a great honor."

Head Baked

"In order to strengthen the bond with Belgium, I had to do more than just serious things. I also attended carnivals and had my head chopped off and baked in the oven. An old tradition in Eeklo. In these four years, I have become the number one tourist of Belgium and I've loved every second of it."

589 is a lot!

“No, I would not be able to name all 589 off the top of my head. I wouldn’t even be able to point out all of the cities on a map. Knokke, Oostende, Zeebrugge, Brugge, and then lower Kokzijde and De Panne, Maasmechelen, Genk, I can tell you where all of them are. I would probably be better at it if I had been allowed to drive myself. But I have to sit in an armored car. I truly know my way around a place when I’ve walked through the town or driven myself. Antwerp, Gent, Brugge, I can find my way with my eyes closed. But I don’t even know the ring around Brussels: everybody has driven there, but not me.”