

Interview with Ambassador Howard Gutman, De Vijfhoek, May 2013.

First American In Belgium

**Ambassador Gutman has been the United States Ambassador to Belgium since August 2009. In July his term will end. The American Embassy is right in the middle of the area that we are investigating this month. This time, an American neighbor.**

**De Vijfhoek: Mister Gutman can you explain what your function as Ambassador means to you?**

Howard Gutman: An Ambassador is a bridge builder between two countries. He creates a bridge on which traffic in both directions is possible, in different conditions and concerning different topics. When two countries trust each other you can discuss economic themes, international security, military cooperation...and I try to build this trust.

**D.V. You knew Belgium before you came here?**

H.G. I had already visited as a tourist. I knew that the quality of life here was very good. And that was important to me. When I came here, my son was 15 and still had to go to high school for three years. And Brussels is a lot like Washington. I like that Brussels is a multicultural town and the capital of Europe.

**D.V. Does the image that you had correspond with your actual experience?**

Mostly, yes, although I did not have any concrete expectations. I also have the feeling that people here in Brussels understand much better what it means to be an Ambassador than in America with its 310 million inhabitants. America is very internally focused and doesn't take foreign Ambassadors into account to the same extent as they do here.

**D.V. Do you enjoy living in this residence, close to your work?**

H.G. Definitely. Each time I come here I feel the same thrill that you likely felt when you entered here. What can be better than living in a house with an American flag, when you are here representing America? And I live in one of the most beautiful locations in Belgium, looking out on the Park.

**D.V. But you have no neighbors here.**

H.G. Yes, and I cannot leave the house without three body guards around me, but I love walking around. To the Sablon for example. There is nothing better than drinking a hot chocolate at one of the wonderful establishments. Or to go to the Grand Place for example, especially now that the scaffolding has been removed from the buildings that have been restored. I love dropping in at the Hard Rock Café which is typically American. I also walk by Haagen Dazs. In Singapore Haagen Dazs was launching a new flavor and I wanted to see if they already had it here. Too bad, they didn't.

**D.V. You seem to know the good locations...**

H.G. It of course depends what you like, but I do know where to go for mussels and French fries, I know where to go for a restaurant that my guests will like. And I know where to go for a good waffle. I can confidently call myself a specialist when it comes to this. I warn my guests to never go to a touristy waffle vendor...If you order a waffle you should definitely demand a fresh one. But the first thing I do when I arrive in America is to go to a Chinese restaurant. Because for Americans, we find it odd for Chinese restaurants to offer curry dishes on the menu, while that's very common in Belgium.

**D.V. Did you learn things here that you think Americans should have more of?**

H.G. Every country can learn a lot from other countries. But I could say that the Belgian modesty and humility is a trait that Americans could have more of. But Belgium is also ahead of America in the way people accept gay rights and universal health care as self-evident...On the other hand, I am amazed to hear that more than half of the students who start university in Leuven do not complete their studies.

**D.V. When you started as Ambassador, you embarked on a plan to visit every Belgian city and commune. This is very media focused?**

H.G. You can give this campaign many names, but media focused? I do it for a very different reason. The image of the U.S. in Belgium had declined in the years preceding the Obama administration, and when I arrived here, Belgium believed strongly in the President who sent me here. I had fantastic products to sell here: America and Barack Obama. But I realized that the bridge between America and Belgium needed to be rebuilt. I could have tried to accomplish this by going to talk to the Prime Minister. But I went to talk to the people of this country. I went to the different cities: Hasselt, Oostende, Dinant, you name it.

**D.V. I heard you make a strong claim that Walloons and Flemings in this country are really not that different and that you cannot understand why they would want to split up.**

H.G. Indeed. Belgium is one of the most united countries I know. But to realize this, you have to put it into perspective. Look (points at a glass), this is Belgium, with on the one side the Walloons and on the other side Flanders. And in comparison (points at the table on which the glass is standing) this is America. The ideas of the Flemish and Walloons are much closer to each other on the most diverse themes; infinitely closer than is the case in America: about women's rights, gay marriage, transatlantic relations, the approach to climate change, gun control. You cannot say that there are two Belghiums on any of these themes. In Belgium, you do not agree on everything, but at least you're on the same side of the table. In America, one party is on the one side and the other party is on the other side of the table.

**D.V. In that way, you are somewhat the ambassador for a united Belgium?**

H.G. But it is not my job to be that. I notice that according to local polls prior to the U.S. elections, 98 percent of the Belgian people agreed with Barack Obama's

approach. And these 98 percent are distributed over seven parties. You are divided, but according to US norms they form one movement.

Here you have a difference between liberals and socialists, but not like in my country between Democrats and Republicans. You should imagine that Romney had 80 percent of the votes in Oklahoma, while Obama had 93 percent in Washington DC, The two areas are each other's direct opposites, and still they are part of the same country. And still I am ambassador of the entire country.

And from my point of view, your different languages are a strength. My wife and I are amazed when we see and hear a French and Dutch speaker interact. Without being conscious of it, they switch from French to Dutch and the other way around. And you effortlessly switch to English.

**D.V. Do you have any idea about the future of Belgium?**

H.G. I come from a country where we have just had elections and where Obama was re-elected and where of course, like in all countries, there are some problems. But one thing is certain: we are a strong democracy. And you know: a democracy is never efficient, but it is still far and away the best form of government. Belgium needed 541 days to form a government. It's a fantastic example of the inefficiency of democracy. But it's a luxury to be this inefficient. The people did not take to the streets like in Egypt or Tunisia. Or erupted into violent conflict like in Syria. You had your headlines and everybody had their opinion about what should happen. There was a preformateur, a formateur, you name it. But we remain solid democracies.

**D.V. How do your ambassadorial colleagues react when you often appear on television and in magazines? You have become a famous American in Belgium.**

H.G. But it's not about this. I believe it's my job. I do it as a problem solver. When I arrived here only eight percent of the Belgians approved of U.S. leadership and 65 percent disapproved. Then a president came whom I believed in and he said: "Go tell them what you have to say." And I do this in many different ways. There was a time when diplomacy took place in back rooms and when the population hardly knew about it. The less people knew about what happened there, the better. But this no longer works today. When I have to ask Belgium for troops in Afghanistan, then it is important that I can justify and clarify this request to all Belgians.

**D.V. So you use the media to communicate broadly?**

H.G. Use, yes, but not in the sense of manipulating. I have a message about the society and values that I want to spread. And this works better when I am present at events such as the MIA-awards or various shows such as Villa Van Thilt, as well as programs like De Zevende Dag.

Besides, my president tried it in his way, even when he, for example, visited Israel. He did not address the Knesset but instead engaged with students there. He said that it is important to find a way to coexist with the Palestinians, not only for security reasons, but also because it is fair.

**D.V.: When will the President come to Belgium?**

H.G.: If everything had gone according to plan, he would have visited in October 2010. But the government had just fallen in the autumn. And then it took 541 days before there was a new government. Meanwhile we came closer to the presidential elections in the United States. And now it is complicated because we have to align the NATO, EU, and Belgian agendas.

**D.V.: Will you give any advice to your successor?**

H.G.: I will tell him that he is surrounded by a fantastic people who have something to say and from whom he can learn. I will also tell him that he needs to keep the bridge between America and Belgium open. And he can do this in various ways. But after me it's his turn. He has to execute the function in his own way.

**D.V.: Will you end your term on July 4<sup>th</sup> with a big party?**

H.G.: Well, I think I may continue until late July, so that there is an American representative on the Belgian national holiday. And I hope that I will not say goodbye to Belgium afterwards. I would like to keep working as an advisor for Belgian companies in America and American companies in Belgium. I want to keep advancing the relationship between both countries.

**D.V.: But first you have another important party?**

H.G.: Yes. Two months ago, we visited the 588<sup>th</sup> commune of the 589 total in Belgium. There is thus one more to go. I thought we should do this in a festive manner. I want to conclude my tour of Belgium on May 5<sup>th</sup> with a party to which I will invite the representatives whom I met during my tour. They include 589 mayors, 10 governors, and the Prime Minister.

**D.V.: And the last commune is symbolic?**

H.G.: The last commune – Voeren - is indeed very symbolic. You laugh, but I think it is a part of the future for the same reason why I think that the Belgians are not as divided as you yourselves think. It is Voeren.

**D.V.: Thank you for this talk.**

H.G.: You're welcome.