

U.S. Ambassador in Virton

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Exactly 10.30 a.m. on Monday. Preceded by a police escort, a black limo stopped in front of the City Hall of Virton. The security measures were quickly overshadowed by the genuine friendliness of U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard Gutman and of his spouse, Michelle. They were received by Mayor Michel Thiry, aldermen Jean-Pierre Alexandre and Sabine Gobert, and by federal House member Annick van den Ende. City Council member Leon Mullens and Jean-Marie Giltaire, the President of the music band, were also present. Giltaire is the only one who had already met with the Ambassador, as his band 'The Straps' had been invited to play at the U.S. Independence Day festivities at the Embassy in Brussels.

'While it is important that I get to know Belgium, I find it as important to know its people,' the Ambassador said, adding that there has been a longtime connection between Virton and the U.S. thanks to the American businesses located in Virton, i.e. Exxon Mobil and Mima Films.

The Ambassador and Virton city officials were received by delegations of the two U.S. businesses which were led by the CEOs. It is first Joost Van Roost, the big boss of Exxon Benelux, accompanied by Pascale Wauthélet, the Director of the Latour plant, and by Johan Sharpé, in charge of PR, who made a presentation of the plant and led a tour of it before the exchange of gifts.

The same scenario took place at Mima Films where Christian Gerard, Director for Belgium, was accompanied by Noella Wuyders, Andre Scherpenbers, Christelle Gilson, and Stephanie Lahaye, from the production, research, and logistics departments.

Very interested, the Ambassador conveyed the same message to the staff of the two plants. 'I am willing to pass on your messages to Rudy Demotte or Joelle Milquet to contribute to the future or expansion of your plant,' he said. Feeling that the cost of labor might be an issue, Michel Thiry hurried to point out that 'the plant has a very skilled staff. Actually, the cost of labor is a win-win deal,' Thiry said.

The Itinerary of a Self-Made Man

Sidebar in L'Avenir

Howard Gutman has European roots, more specifically Polish ones, as his father, a resistant during WWII, emigrated to the United States in 1950 to find a job. 'He worked in the textile sector in New York,' the Ambassador explains.

'Grandparents, parents, and kids were living in a two-bedroom apartment and I myself worked washing dishes in restaurants as of the age of 16 in order to pay for my studies,' he added.

And it is brilliant studies that Howard Gutman, who was named one of the best Washington lawyers between 2004 and 2007, pursued. Earlier in his career, this man who graduated from Harvard and Columbia had been special assistant to the FBI, and then worked in the media team of Presidential candidate Barack Obama.

The Ambassador knows the media quite well, having participated in numerous TV and radio talks shows. He even played in TV series as well as the role of a lawyer in Tim Robins' *Noise* or a role in the 2009 remake of *Fame*.

This being said, he clearly enjoyed his trip to Virton. 'I know the Province of Luxembourg pretty well via Orval, Bastogne, Arlon, Durbuy, and La Roche. When I arrived in Virton, I felt a very warmly welcoming atmosphere as soon as I opened the door of my car,' he said.

Very Interested by the Latour Museum

The Ambassador, who was really interested in the Baillet-Latour museum, discovered that the Baillet family has a world reputation both in the Olympic Games history and in brewery sector. The Ambassador was also very much interested by the enthusiastic explanations of Jean Dauphin, the founder and curator of the museum. In other words, the Ambassador received a Royal reception by the curator who, like he had done with King Albert II a few years ago, was not afraid of talking very casually with the Ambassador.

And in Latour, it is the alderman Alexandre, who is an English-language teacher who translated for the Ambassador what Jean Dauphin was saying.

Will the Ambassador Come to the Hamawé Festival in 2012?

It is wearing the hat of President of an acoustic band that Jean-Marie Giltaire, the leader of the band *The Straps*, met with the Ambassador again. Did they make another step toward a participation of *The Straps* in a Festival in Louisiana, like the Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission Robert Faucher discussed when he came on the occasion of the Hamawé Roots Festival on Whit Monday? Perhaps.

Besides, Howard Gutman promised that he would come with his wife at the Hamawé Roots Festival in 2012, if his duties and schedule permit it.