

Uitreiking ereteken nationale orde aan dhr. Chaim Pluczenik

3 maart 2016

Dear Mister Pluczenik,

Dear Chaim,

Ik herinner me de eerste keer dat we mekaar ontmoetten alsof het gisteren was. Jacky Roth en Freddy Hanard leidden me rond in AWDC. Ongeveer halverwege het bezoek stapte u vriendelijk als altijd het kantoor binnen waar ik naar een aantal stenen keek. Ahteloos stak u de hand in uw broekzak en vroeg me om mijn hand even uit te steken. Handpalm naar beneden. U legde er 3, 4 grote ruwe stenen op en zei: "Voila, dat is bijna één miljoen dollar." Waarna u een paar prachtig geslepen exemplaren toonde. Ik weet niet of het bluffpoker was. Onder de indruk was ik wel! Sedertdien heb ik u vooral leren appreciëren op de strategische overlegmomenten ter voorbereiding van het Masterplan 2020

You and I have at least one thing in common: an **untouched belief and faith** in Antwerp's position and role as the **world diamond center**. Not from a naïve point of view or some vain hope, no, because of a firm belief in our **enormous assets**: in Antwerp, in the sector, in our people, in our history AND our future. Last week, the Huffington Post named this wonderful city 'Western Europe's best kept secret'. I quote from the article: "The centuries old diamond trade is one of the many reasons why this city always seems to be in its golden age."

Nevertheless, the diamond trade in Antwerp and in the rest of the world is **under duress**. New and noteworthy patterns as well as challenges are emerging. New superpowers are flexing their muscles; access to financing is becoming more difficult, particularly with the closure of the Antwerp Diamond Bank; and last but not least, Chinese demand is falling.

Extra efforts to **remain a competitive, global player and diamond center** are essential. Efforts like, for instance, improving controls on the diamond trade, or increasing customer confidence by issuing trustworthy and internationally recognized certificates for polished diamonds. Antwerp must **return to and focus on its core values: innovation, transparency, professionalism and expertise**. Indeed, the key elements that turned Antwerp into the world's diamond capital many centuries ago remain its assets today.

Not surprisingly, these values **return as key elements throughout Mr. Pluczenik's professional career**. For instance, the many investments in **state-of-the art technologies and knowledge**, in order to enhance Antwerp's industrial lead. Your attention and commitment to **socially responsible entrepreneurship**.

Being Antwerp's largest individual buyer of rough diamonds, you also **contribute to our overall diamond trade**, as well as to the **preservation and development of the Belgian diamond trade** and manufacturing industry.

When reading about your achievements, I cannot but conclude that you are **an excellent ambassador**: for Antwerp, for our diamond industry.

In the diamond sector, **reaching out globally is essential**. Strategic international connections are vital. But the competition is fierce, and the players on the global diamond stage are increasing. Personal contacts, based upon openness and transparency, mutual respect, positive commitment and engagement, boldness and ambition, can and do make a difference. You, Mr. Pluczenik, are connected with various and interesting corners of the world: Botswana, Namibia, Russia's Alrosa. Last December, I had the privilege to attend an Alrosa networking event in Moscow: I hope that your connections offer you as much knowledge, insights, inspiration, skills, ideas, and warm friendships as they do to me.

But also **close to home**, you fulfill your ambassador's role in a perfect way. By **sharing your knowledge, expertise and enthusiastic optimism** with the **young and upcoming generation of Antwerp diamond traders**, you actively invest in the main asset of the Antwerp diamond future.

I started my speech with one of our shared beliefs. To conclude, I want to touch upon a **common concern of us**. Or let me rephrase that, and call it a shared challenge/ambition.

We have to **improve the image and reputation of our region**, of the diamond industry. We don't want to be 'Western Europe's best kept secret'. We **have to stand out**. We have so much to show to the world, so much to be proud of: a world class port, the world's number one diamond city, an impressive chemical cluster, a thriving fashion scene and design-oriented sector, a number of excellent education institutes, culinary spotlights.

We can look back on a **fascinating and rich history**, we can and must be proud of our **multicultural and diverse society**, we can brag with recent **innovative architectural projects** and **cultural events** that turn this region into a vibrant place. We have the assets, we have the talented and well-skilled people, we enjoy an excellent reputation when it comes down to doing business... As you state it, Mr. Pluczenik, "We are most capable, but maybe our PR is underdeveloped." You must all know that wherever and whenever needed or wanted, the sector can always count on my full support. Here in Antwerp, we have inherited an impressive diamond past; it is our common challenge and responsibility to create an as impressive future.

Mr. Pluczenik

It is an honour that I can award you today with the **distinction of Commander in the Order of the Crown**. It reflects and expresses our gratitude and our respect towards all your achievements, and to your immeasurable contribution to Antwerp's biggest pride: our diamonds. From his Majesty King Philippe and the federal government, from all of us present here, from the whole of the sector, thank you, and congratulations on your distinction!