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Ramskells, the Witness: The cat who guards international law

By Scott M. Gordon

There's an old English proverb about cats: "A cat has nine lives. For three he plays, for three he strays and for the last three he stays." For one cat in The Hague, he spends at least one of his lives watching over the Peace Palace.

The Peace Palace stands in The Hague, Netherlands. It is dedicated to a mission that should resonate in today's troubled times. That mission — peace through law — has roots in the first Hague Peace Conference held in 1899, which was attended by the representatives of 26 countries focused on discussions of disarmament, international jurisdiction and arbitration. It was at this conference that the Permanent Court of Arbitration was established and the plan for the Peace Palace was adopted.

In 1907, 44 countries met in the Hague at the Second Hague Peace Conference. During the course of this conference, the foundation stone of the Peace Palace was laid. On Aug. 28, 1913, with support from Andrew Carnegie and the Dutch Royal Family, the Peace Palace was deemed open.

To this day, the Peace Palace pursues the mission of peace through law. It houses the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the United Nations International Court of Justice, the Hague Academy of International Law and the Peace Palace Library.

Standing on the grounds of the Peace Palace, set off to the side of the historic building looking onto



Ramskells in front of the Library at the Peace Palace who led the judges of the court to safety in the fire of 1924
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its sweeping lawns and toward the Peace Palace Library and Hague Academy of International Law, is a large sculpture of a black cat. He looks towards the Academy, his back to the entrance of the Peace Palace facility. The majestic cat stands almost 11 feet tall and weighs almost 4,000 pounds.

For everyone who visits the palace, the question — "What's the story with the cat?" — immediately leaps to mind. The answer is not so clear. Most anyone you ask will tell you the story of Ramskells, the black cat of the Peace Palace.

In this famous story, Ramskells was a feral British Bombay cat who

decided in 1922 that his home was the Peace Palace. He was originally cared for by one of the gardeners on the grounds, a man named Hispanel Peralta. Hispanel cared for Ramskells in the small apartment he was provided on the palace grounds. But as much as he cared for Ramskells, the young gardener could not feed him well on his meager salary.

The Peace Palace housed the Permanent Court of International Justice, and the Justices of the Court lived in the Palace. Each day the justices enjoyed a delicious high tea. Ramskells, drawn by the aroma of the sandwiches and treats, ventured

into the justices' lounge and demanded his due. His charms worked on the justices, and he soon became a part of the Court. Ramskells would soon spend much of his day in the lounge, content with treats from the high tea that made it to the floor by offer of one of the judges or that happened to fall from a plate. He would purr through the lofty legal discussions, content and cared for by his good friends.

In the early morning hours of March 22, 1924, a fire broke out in the Peace Palace as the justices were sleeping. They were trapped in their quarters and could not find a way out. Their loyal friend Ramskells

got to them through an open window that he had used to gain entry and wander through the Palace. He found one of the justices, who sounded the alarm, and Ramskells led all the justices through the burning building to safety. Unfortunately, Ramskells succumbed to smoke inhalation three days after the tragic fire.

The story goes that the justices were so overcome by grief at the loss of their beloved Ramskells, they decided to build a memorial to their friend on the grounds of the Peace Palace. They commissioned a local artist named Brettamore Higgs to create the memorial. Higgs crafted the sculpture from a rare local granite, and today the loyal Ramskells dutifully watches over his beloved International Court of Justices.

But as lawyers and judges, we have to look at the evidence. Dig-

ging into the story of the heroic Ramskell, the story unravels. Ramskells is described as a British Bombay cat. The British Bombay is a large sleek black cat described as a miniature black panther. However, the breed was developed by a breeder from Louisville, Kentucky in 1965. The British Bombay cat was not recognized as a breed until 1970.

But even if Ramskells may not have been a British Bombay cat and was another breed of black cat, there are challenges to the story of the hero cat. It turns out that the sculpture of the cat is actually a bronze sculpture created by Henk Visch in 2007. The sculpture is actually called "The Witness."

The Witness sits on top of the Peace Palace's library and archives of international law watching over the treasures beneath. The sculptor Henk Visch has described his work as follows: "This animal can see in

the dark and there in the Peace Palace it is the watchful onlooker and witness to everything that we humans do not want to see. I could not help thinking about Alice's cat, which leads her to the other side of the looking-glass and back again. Something else that played on my mind was the Egyptian cat-headed goddess Bastet, who accompanies the dead into the world of darkness. Visitors to the library who look out through the window are confronted eye to eye with the cat."

So, for Ramskells, The Witness, perhaps the two divergent stories blend into his nine lives. The wonderful story of the hero cat so widely told is belied by the evidence, but perhaps it is one of our cat's lives in which he plays; as The Witness, it is one of his lives in which he stays. We can only wonder what he will do with his other seven lives.

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