

## CHAPTER 11

# Underground

ON JANUARY 7, 1942, TWO DAYS AFTER THE POLICE RAID ON HIBERNIAN Hall, Moran and Commissioner Timilty sat down for a one-on-one interview at police headquarters. “How and where did you get the books?” Timilty asked. “Flanders Hall Publishing Company,” Moran replied. “I purchased them after a trip—the company was going out of business, and the books were to be destroyed.” “Who did you receive this tip from?” “I have forgotten now. It came to me indirectly.”<sup>1</sup>

Commissioner Timilty did not press the point. The interview, which lasted ninety minutes, hardly seems like an interrogation. Moran was not under arrest, he did not have a lawyer in the room, and there is no stenographer’s record. What we know of the interview comes from an unsigned seven-page statement generated by the two men together.

By reputation, Joseph Timilty was severe in his treatment of Moran.<sup>2</sup> That was certainly the image he hoped to project, but reality looked different. When Timilty and Moran were in a room together, they acted less like cop and suspect and more like friends. They nearly were. At the very least, they were similarly creatures of Boston Irish politics. Both were acolytes of James Michael Curley, the mayor, governor, member of congress, and political boss who became Moran’s business partner in the effort to acquire a radio station. Timilty’s father “Diamond” Jim, meanwhile, had been a powerful local pol and union leader in Curley’s camp. In 1936, when Curley needed a pliable police commissioner, he chose Diamond Jim’s son Joe.<sup>3</sup>

After so many had dithered—and some had worked diligently—it was the Boston Police who finally got to Moran. The Boston Police, whose ranks were full of frontiers: card-carrying members, Coughlinites, men who recognized themselves in Moran's vision of a just world. Yet, if no one saw police intervention coming, there was a logic to it. Among all the investigators and spooks in Boston, only the police could have moved so recklessly. Reporters, spies, and activists had to be more careful. Joe Timilty—prompted by Sweeney and equally unaware that he was doing MI6's dirty work—could follow his impulse.

The commissioner did not really know what he was getting into with Moran. Timilty's intelligence on Moran appears to have been meager. Their conversation was unfocused, shifting around politics, theology, and law and never drilling into possible crimes. Timilty asked virtually no follow-up questions when he had the opportunity. The statement the men agreed to is a dissembling and circuitous piece of work.

The greater part of the document consists of Timilty confronting Moran with his own quotes, though only after February 1941, when the Radical Squad restarted surveillance of Christian Front meetings. In other words, the extent of Timilty's evidence was Moran's public statements. During the conversation, Moran was occasionally evasive but mostly acknowledged and defended his firmly held, well-known positions. Many of the questions just filled time. "Do you have a shortwave radio set in your home?" Timilty asked. "Yes," Moran responded, "a receiver." There were no further questions on that subject, no efforts to probe Moran's communications, learn who was feeding him tips, whom he may have been working for.

On and on it went. "On June 30, 1941, you said you hoped Hitler would wipe out the entire British Empire," Timilty pointed out. "The remark is true," Moran responded. He had no qualms with the British people, he said, but "the Empire itself is a curse to the world as a whole, and has always been America's worst enemy." Regarding his "Heil Hitler" salute after the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, Moran reminded Timilty that the United States was not at war when he made that gesture. He only "wanted to salute the man" for being "the first to challenge the power of that murderous dictator [Stalin]."

Moran frequently got the better of Timilty. For instance, Timilty pressed Moran on his August 18 statement to the effect that draftees "have the perfect right to desert" from the US Army. Desertion, of course, is unlawful, but Moran explained that the right he had in mind was a moral one, sanctioned by Catholic doctrine. If US soldiers "believed they were being forced to train

and fight in an unjust war on foreign soil for which they have no concern,” Moran said, then “they have a moral right to refuse and if necessary to desert.” A devout Catholic, Timilty was not about to argue with tenets of just war theory embraced by Saint Augustine himself. When confronted with other past statements, Moran would simply say that he never said any such thing—that statements attributed to him were “positively untrue and stupid.”<sup>4</sup>

Attorney General Robert Bushnell was right about Timilty. The commissioner had a nose for publicity and smelled an opportunity in the story of Moran’s books. But publicity is all that Timilty wanted. He betrayed no interest in a serious investigation of Moran. For evidence of Timilty’s insouciance, one need look no further than the interview and resulting statement. The document had no legal meaning, but it would have its intended effects. The statement would placate politicians grumbling about accountability: here were the police working dutifully to bring a stop to disloyal talk. Timilty, in particular, would look like an engaged and community-minded officer. And by giving a statement to the overmatched Timilty, Moran would escape pressure to speak with more capable law enforcers. As Bushnell himself lamented, the Boston Police had spoiled every prosecutor’s chance at Moran, at least for the time being.

Moran seems to have appreciated this, too. He knew that Timilty had nothing important on him, which meant Moran was in a good position to win a deal in his own favor. A man like Timilty—a political appointee with mayoral aspirations—was easily played. Moran could offer Timilty good publicity in exchange for something far more important: protection. Moran had secrets, and it was best that the police and the courts not begin prying. If he gave Timilty a media win, the police would effectively exonerate him by declaring his case closed. So Moran agreed to almost everything Timilty wanted. The Christian Front would voluntarily shutter its office in Copley Square, turn over all of its books, and cease meetings. Moran was not worried about state charges—even Timilty must have suspected the Commonwealth would gain no traction in court, which explained why the deal appealed to him. But even if Moran could beat a state charge, it was important to prevent a trial that might uncover his intrigues with Scholz. For Moran, it made perfect sense to give up the trappings of the Christian Front if he could stay out of jail.

Stay out of jail and continue working. Significantly, Moran was also allowed to keep the Christian Front’s membership cards, a key to his network

and therefore his influence. When asked to turn them over, he refused. “The Christian Front in Massachusetts is a one-man affair, and I am the one man,” Moran explained to the *Boston Globe*. This must have been tough for observers of the front to swallow. The *Herald-Traveler*, whose journalists knew better than most the scale of Moran’s effort, made sure to note the odd claim. Moran promised that his “one-man group would disappear when he retired from it,” the paper reported. This was an early sign that shutting down the front did not mean shutting down Moran.<sup>5</sup>

As he walked out of police headquarters, Moran announced to the press, “We are in perfect agreement.” Timilty, meanwhile, played up his role as a determined yet merciful patriot and public servant. “I told him straight from the shoulder, that if he does not cooperate in our effort to promote unity with our allies, I will take steps to have him put away for the duration of the war,” Timilty said. But Timilty also emphasized “that he intends to cooperate—that he is sincere.”<sup>6</sup> If Timilty had known anything about Moran, the commissioner would have realized that there was nothing trustworthy about him. Moran did have sincere beliefs, but honesty was only useful inasmuch as it realized those beliefs. For Moran, truth and falsehood were both means to more important ends. “Even the Devil told the truth at times,” he once told an FBI informant.<sup>7</sup>

### The Friday Group

While Timilty was gloating, Moran was composing a final letter to his followers, a letter marked by solemnity but also defiance. He recognized the gravity of the situation and was prepared to make a strategic retreat. But he had no intention of retiring.

“The Christian Front of America is hereby officially disbanded,” Moran wrote in his circular of January 9, 1942. The rest of the letter offered a moral and legal defense of the group and looked forward to the eventual continuation of its work. “We have committed no crime nor broken any law of the city, the state, or the nation,” Moran assured. The front had not been sanctioned; the Viereck books were not “seized” but rather were turned over willingly. Moran made clear that he hoped for the victory “of our country against all its enemies”—“all” implying not just the Germans and Japanese but also Jews, Soviets, and Communists of every stripe, and maybe the British too. “At the termination of the war,” he promised, “if we are permitted to resume

our activities without official objection, those who accept our principles will rejoin us voluntarily.”

What Moran well understood was that these principles would outlast any police pressure or media glare. The public apparatus of the Christian Front was only a tool for articulating, spreading, and enacting an idea. The religious and anti-Semitic urges that animated the Christian Front had not disbanded. Indeed, something very much like the front persisted without Moran. In a late 1942 report, the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime US intelligence agency, concluded that the front had metastasized. The Christian Front “continues to act in Irish associations by controlling key positions,” the report held. The same report suggested that while Moran had ceded public leadership, in his stead Father Edward Lodge Curran was carrying on front-like meetings.<sup>8</sup>

Not only were others perpetuating the front’s mission, but so was Moran. He took his work underground, as he said he would. While police were swarming Hibernian Hall, Moran issued a warning: “If they are foolish enough not to lock me up, I’ll continue to work personally.” He even repeated that warning to Timilty. He told the commissioner straight to his face that he had no plans to quit.<sup>9</sup> Moran had been considering going to ground since at least April 1941, while the New York sedition trial was playing out. At that time, he bemoaned what he called the “censorship” of newspapers that refused to report on the front in a manner he deemed responsible. “Despite these restrictions,” he told his followers, “the Christian Front will go on, even under-cover if necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

That is precisely what happened. Shortly after the police interview, Moran began holding small weekly meetings with stalwart supporters in private homes. They called themselves the Friday Group. The Friday Group was every bit a remnant cell of the Christian Front. There were differences, to be sure: the group had to stay out of public view, and it could not align with Father Coughlin, who was himself under suspicion. In April 1942 *Social Justice* was shut down by US Attorney General Biddle under the Espionage Act. But in most every other respect, the Friday Group was an incarnation of the Christian Front. Surrounded by likeminded admirers who similarly were feeling the sting of public approbation, Moran used the Friday Group as a forum in which to continue developing his political views. The Friday group was an advanced workshop in anti-Semitism and, increasingly, revolution. From underground, Moran was elaborating a more extreme form of the

Boston Christian Front, the kernel of a political force that might one day prove more potent than the original organization had been.

The FBI infiltrated the Friday Group shortly after its first meeting. With Hoover breathing down Peterson's neck, the bureau's Boston field office did not want to miss out on Moran's next move. The FBI's informant, codenamed T-1, was a perfect fit for Moran. She worked at the Catholic information Center in downtown Boston and was a reserve member of the US Navy. Hailing from the Alsace region of France, she spoke both French and German fluently and would discuss sensitive matters with Moran in German.<sup>11</sup>

By May 1942 T-1 had insinuated herself into the Friday Group so thoroughly that Moran and his inner circle began to take her into his confidence. One evening "the men openly discussed before me how they were carrying on sabotage," she reported. She was referring to efforts to disrupt labor unions operating at the Boston waterfront. Moran's cadre "talked of rubber cement, something about sulfuric acid, placing the acid on tires, and putting oil in loads of fish." Labor sabotage was a new avenue for Moran, probably connected to his suspicions that Communists were infiltrating waterfront unions. Later in the evening, as the group sat back with glasses of beer, T-1 raised a toast. "I said 'Heil Hitler' to Moran, and he just grinned." Moran made no comment, instead turning to his latest grievances against Boston Mayor Maurice Tobin. The mayor was trying to spy on him, Moran said, to see if the front was still holding meetings. "On the other hand," he mentioned with satisfaction, "the Boston Police are our friends and we can depend on them."<sup>12</sup> It is fair to say that Timilty made a different impression on Moran than on *Life* magazine.

T-1 found one meeting of twenty-six Friday Group members in Roxbury so boring that she nearly fell asleep—that is, until a woman in the group started talking about revolution. The woman, a nurse, argued that soldiers should mutiny. "It's no worse to be shot while trying to cause revolution here than it was to be shot across the ocean," she claimed. Moran picked up the theme. "The revolution to come has to be started by men in arms," he explained. "It will come, perhaps, in a year." Moran felt that he and his fellow true believers would be well positioned. "We have the police, most of the Catholic clergy, and the majority of the Armed Forces with us," he said. "They will all be ready when the time comes to strike." Moran's Christian Front had been an intellectual foil to Cassidy's revolutionaries. Now, from the metaphorical bunker, Moran was adopting Cassidy's outlook.

Before he dismissed his gathering of would-be Catholic revolutionaries, Moran gave an update on his own work. “I have played it safe,” he told his friends. “The authorities have nothing on me.” In a way, he seemed liberated. “I will go on with my work of influencing the Army, Navy, clergy and police . . . and of collecting the names and addresses of all Communists in the country.” In his mind, Moran had the future all figured out, a future in which his vision of law and justice would predominate within the institutions that really mattered, and the enemy would be firmly under his control.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside the FBI, Arthur Derounian was following the erstwhile Christian Front boss after he formally shuttered his outfit. The undercover journalist did not know about the Friday Group, but he was one of the few who had always understood that Moran was a hazard, regardless of his organizational infrastructure. Moran had a dangerous mind and thus could foment significant strife on his own—he might even more trouble than when he was operating in public. Derounian had followed the New York front as well and recognized that it had come in two flavors: the public organization that held raucous meetings in Brooklyn and gave statements to the press, and the subterranean branch that collected guns and bombs and meant to violently take down the government.

On November 12, 1942, Derounian visited Moran at his new home in West Roxbury. “There was a large picture of Christ on the vestibule wall; there was a statue of Christ on the piano; and a still larger picture of Christ on the living room wall.” Their conversation began with small talk. “He told me about ex-governor Curley, and praised him to the heights,” Derounian wrote. Moran seemed grateful to Curley. “He knows every legal trick in the books,” Moran said. The conversation eventually turned to revolution. “He sees the revolution starting in the Army,” Derounian noted. “He sees a tremendous amount of discontent in the Army.” Moran forcefully argued that it was his constitutional right to speak of revolution. “Revolution by bullets, not ballots, is the only way to clean house, and get back to the Constitution,” Moran thought.

When Derounian asked about the Christian Front, Moran seemed more cautious. “I have no association with anybody,” he said, “whatever I do now, I do alone.” He explained that he had stopped communicating with Father Coughlin and did not attend anyone’s meetings. Occasionally, he admitted, small groups came to meet without him. But Moran was adamant that, in spite of his own revolutionary talk, these people were not planning anything

untoward. “I control them all, and I’ve told them to lay low,” he said. “You have to be careful.”

Derounian concluded that “Moran is laying low, playing a lone hand, still apparently in charge of subversive forces, but he is not showing his hand except to those he trusts.” Where others saw Moran fading, the typically clear-eyed Derounian saw bad tidings. “Someday, a lot of bloodshed and misery” was going to come to Boston, he wrote. “These are hard words, but no one who knows the Fascist can visit Boston and remain impervious to the burning Fascist fever that has enveloped the entire city.” Derounian had a flair for drama, and his statement was to an extent hyperbolic. Clearly there were anti-Fascists making an impact in Boston, but with Timilty taking all the credit for shuttering the Christian Front, the likes of Sweeney and IADA were consigned to obscurity. Perhaps Derounian did not realize there were forces aligned against Moran. Or maybe he did realize but believed these forces too weak to make a difference. One way or another, something about the interaction with Moran left Derounian more frightened than ever. “Someday Boston shall come to flame: Jew, Protestant, and Catholic alike will be scorched.”<sup>14</sup>

### Abiding Anti-Fascism

As Moran moved underground, opponents continued to pay attention. One of these was a new player in the drama. John Franklin Carter was a State Department official close to the Oval Office, who operated as a kind of private detective for President Roosevelt on the international scene. He was astute, liberal, and globalist, a fine journalist who wrote a popular syndicated column under the pen name of Jay Franklin. He was also, according to one scholar, almost certainly a controlled agent of Soviet Military Intelligence, the GRU.<sup>15</sup>

For some reason Carter, who rarely investigated domestic issues, was deeply interested in the situation in Boston. On January 26, after Moran was let off the hook, Carter wrote to Roosevelt, “Moran might not kill anybody himself, but he might easily incite somebody else to have a try at assassination.” Carter informed Roosevelt that Boston Congressman and House Majority Leader John McCormack believed “Moran should be taken in front of a couple of doctors and put away for the duration” lest he “incite some weak minded, fanatical person.” It is reasonable to speculate that Carter was doing the GRU’s bidding, trying to get rid of Moran once and for all. “Francis P. Moran is a thoroughly dangerous man,” Carter concluded.<sup>16</sup>

But while McCormack agreed that Moran was a nuisance, he did not share the view that Moran should be imprisoned. The majority leader referred to Moran as a “dough” man, presumably implying a small mind. McCormack’s and Moran’s families knew each other, which may have been in Moran’s favor. Moran’s mother Bridget “was the counsellor of the neighborhood,” McCormack recalled of his South Boston home. “Everyone would come to her with their troubles.” And McCormack’s brother, the spirited and towering saloon-keeper Edward “Knocko” McCormack, served as a political foot soldier for Moran’s friend James Michael Curley.<sup>17</sup>

McCormack would not, ultimately, sign off on actions against Moran, and Roosevelt remained unmoved. The Carter episode was another lucky break for Moran. Either his arch enemy, the Soviets, were after him, or an extremely well-connected and influential official was. One way or the other, Moran was fortunate to escape yet again.

If Soviet espionage could not bring Moran down, perhaps American activism could. Specifically, IADA. With the United States in the war, Moran apparently suppressed, and isolationists chastened amid an atmosphere of patriotism, BSC pulled the plug on IADA, dramatically cutting its staff. By March OSS determined “that the work of the organization has been done entirely by Ms. Sweeney.” That was not entirely true—Sweeney was able to retain a longtime friend, Gus Gazulis, to conduct street-level investigations. But her actions after the front went underground do suggest that she was suddenly operating largely on her own. IADA was finally the American anti-Fascist organization it purported to be.<sup>18</sup>

Early during Moran’s underground phase, Sweeney attended a number of speeches by Father Curran—speeches arranged by Moran and attended by his followers. On January 31, 1942, Curran spoke to a crowd of more than 1,200 in the Boston neighborhood of Hyde Park. “Present in the audience were faces familiar to anyone who had attended Christian Front meetings sponsored by Francis P. Moran,” an observer from the Jewish Community Relations council wrote.<sup>19</sup> Moran brought Curran back in February, this time at the Hotel Bradford in downtown Boston. Some 3,000 listeners attended, packing what was said to be the largest ballroom in New England. Sweeney was one of the throng. “I cannot emphasize strongly enough the tremendous hold Curran has on his audience at all times,” she reported. She described Curran’s method as “wedge-driving,” an attempt to turn the Allies against each other. And so it was. “Nazism is the enemy abroad,” Curran thundered,

“but Communism is the enemy at home!” Americans nervous about alliance with the Soviet Union would not have been heartened.<sup>20</sup>

Curran took care to operate within the boundaries of publicly acceptable discourse. His speeches were laden with isolationism and nationalism but not overt anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism was very much implied, but Curran the lawyer knew how to play it safe. In some ways he was a throwback to Moran’s earlier, more cautiously anti-Semitic days. This ensured that Curran would not run into too much opposition, whether from the public or the Church. If Curran went overboard, Cardinal O’Connell might ask him to stay out of Boston, and Curran would have to comply. Whatever O’Connell’s opinion of the British and the war, he did not want to deal with the repercussions of forthright priestly anti-Semitism in his archdiocese.<sup>21</sup>

Curran was so popular that Moran arranged another engagement, this time for March 17, a date pregnant with meaning in the local Irish American community. The seventeenth was both St. Patrick’s Day and, in Boston, Evacuation Day—the anniversary of the date in 1776 when British troops departed the city after an eleven-month occupation. Word of Curran’s address broke a week before the event, and Sweeney organized a public campaign urging the sponsor, the South Boston Citizens Association, to withdraw Curran’s invitation. Reverends Donald Lothrop and Walton Cole both lodged protests. Standing in front of Boston City Hall, Cole argued that Father Curran was a Fascist. IADA released an open letter to Mayor Tobin, petitioning him to “exercise executive power to prevent Edward Lodge Curran, associate of the police-closed Christian Front, from speaking.” The Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League asked Attorney General Francis Biddle to investigate. Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam called out Curran for his “anti-Semitic emphasis” and pleaded with Boston officials to cancel the event.<sup>22</sup>

But Moran made sure the speech would stay on the calendar. Mayor Tobin was out of town, and one of Moran’s former lieutenants in the Christian Front, William B. Gallagher, got the acting mayor to serve as master of ceremonies. Other political figures also backed Curran and Moran. City Councilor Joseph Scannell described Curran as a “Christian and patriotic person who respects the attitudes and beliefs of all.”<sup>23</sup> For Moran, Curran’s speech was more than an address to supporters. It was also a chance to take a swing at Sweeney. Little did she know, but Moran had something planned for her. Friday Group members had suggested picketing the IADA office on St. Patrick’s Day, but Moran held them back. He wanted them at Father Curran’s speech.

Despite the swell of controversy surrounding the speech, as Curran's words proved to be anodyne calls for unity. The real drama occurred before Curran took the stage. As the audience was filing the auditorium at South Boston High School—with more crowds outside to listen to the speech on loudspeakers—one of Moran's plants recognized his target: Frances Sweeney. The fronter came up to Sweeney and started harassing her, calling her a Jew. An FBI agent who was present called on police to intervene. When the man was taken away, Sweeney took a seat near the front row. Now she was marked. As confidential informant T-1 explained, Moran had coached the Friday Group beforehand, instructing them to "crowd out Jews" from in front of the stage. "M. told us just what to do," she said.<sup>24</sup>

An eyewitness told the *Evening American* newspaper what happened next. "John J. Hughes, who described himself as a friend of William Gallagher, chairman of the event, asked Ms. Sweeney to leave. She refused. Hughes lifted her out of her seat by the collar of her coat and escorted her down the aisle amidst cries of 'Put Her out.'" Gallagher claimed that Sweeney had taken a seat at the press table to which she was not entitled, but of course the operation against her had been planned. When it came to the constitutional values of citizen assembly and protest, Moran was an absolutist only in his own case.<sup>25</sup>

Sweeney was undeterred by Moran's actions. Indeed, his continued operations emboldened her. Like Derounian, she realized that Moran's dangerousness would only mount while he was beyond the public eye. With the United States in the war, she shifted her focus from isolationism to anti-Semitism and became more invested in activism on behalf of Boston's Jewish community in the face of continuing bigotry from Moran and his followers. It is precisely because she was herself a Catholic that she felt the need to work on behalf of Jews. "She took her Catholic faith seriously when it proclaimed that anti-Semitism was anti-Christian," a friend wrote.<sup>26</sup>

Sweeney was not one to mince words about the sources of anti-Semitism in her hometown. As she told an agent from the American Jewish Committee, "I am forced in this Boston situation to generalize sharply on racial and religious grounds." The "racial and religious bigotry involved comes directly from the Irish Catholic community." That meant that Moran was still her enemy. "The Christian Front, though officially dissolved continues in undercover organizations," she wrote, with "many members active."<sup>27</sup> In the year to come, she would have her work cut out for her, protecting Boston's Jews from Irish Catholics under Moran's spell.