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Their town was destroyed 40 years ago. Now, the Olympics have arrived

By [Jacob Whitehead](#)

TESERO, Italy — The scout hut needed fixing. Clemente Deflorian's father was a carpenter, and as lunchtime drew near, he and his sons were weaving up the valley road in their old pickup truck, laden with planks. It was July 19, 1985.

Deflorian was 15 years old, his brother three years older. As the tarmac rose, what looked like smoke appeared on the horizon. The next thing he remembers is his father swerving to the side of the road. He turned to them and pointed to his right. Then he told them to run.

"I sprinted away," he remembers. "And then there was a huge noise. It was a din, an uproar, like a train passing next to your ear. And then absolute silence. You could not even hear the birds. Nothing.

"All that remained was the water that flowed."

The 1985 failure of the Prestavel Dam, high above Tesero, left the Stava Valley in ruins.

Confronted by a wall of mud, silt, and water, its inhabitants were helpless, even if they had understood what was happening. By the time the roar stopped, 268 people were dead.

The wave took less than three minutes to reach Tesero, the flows reaching the confluence with the River Avisio on the valley bottom. Behind, it left a carpet of mud, stone, and twisted metal.

Forty years on, the Olympics have arrived in town. It is less than a five-minute walk from the Tesero Cross Country Stadium, where Jessie Diggins will bring down the curtain on her Olympic career, where Johannes Høsflot Klæbo is making his bid for a historic six gold medals in a single Games, to where the mud once lay.



*The cross-country skiing stadium in Tesero, site of the Olympic events.
David Fitzgerald / Sportsfile via Getty Images*

With the stadium built three years after the tragedy, its survivors see the Olympics as a sign of rebirth. But this is also a lived history, not an ancient one. These Games are an opportunity for remembrance, but by sharing their memories, they want to forge the changes that will finally bury the past.

Just as it was quiet then, it is quiet now. There is now a timber farm on the site of the old Prestavel Mine, while two roan horses graze on the slopes where the dam once lay, the northerly wind ruffling their manes.



The only remnants marking the old Prestavel Mine. Jacob Whitehead / The Athletic

There are no signs of the old earthworks, but an open swathe of ground still curves down the valley, save for two trembling pines. A child's playhouse stands in a nearby garden, its shutters painted with hearts.

One hundred fifty metres below, Graziano Lucchi unlocks the door of the Centro Stava 1985. It is a cold day; he stamps the snow off his boot, removes his hat, and runs his hands through his hair.

On that day, it took just 50 seconds for the flow to reach here, the hamlet of Stava. Every building now standing was constructed in the disaster's wake. Lucchi was born here, if it is indeed here; he was 31 when everything changed.

"This is not the Stava that I remember," he says. "It was impossible to rebuild it like it was. Impossible. We used to go to the woods. We collected mushrooms, we rode our bikes. Ours was just a little village. We were happy."

Deep in the mountains and far from the city's tumult, the valley's lifeblood had been its river, sustaining Alpine farms, paper mills, and, for the previous 50 years, three hotels with sweeping views over the meadow. Lucchi's parents had retired here, to a wooden house handbuilt by his grandfather at the end of the previous century.

"I am only alive because it happened on a Friday," Lucchi says quietly. "I was working in Bolzano. Me and my wife would have been in Stava the day after. And then I heard that something had happened in the valley.

"I ran and volunteered for the local ambulance. We arrived in the next hours. And it was impossible to know what really happened. The rescuers didn't know either. They began to dig, but it was impossible to see what was house, what was hotel, what was earth.

"And so, at 5 p.m., I went into the woods and looked at the scene. And I said to myself, 'This is impossible to survive.' Our only hope was that my parents had maybe gone for a walk. But it was just after noon. It was lunchtime."



Graziano Lucchi identifies where his home once stood. Jacob Whitehead / The Athletic

Lucchi's parents were two of the 268 victims. The number was so high because of the three hotels in the village; each of them was filled with tourists, sitting down for their meal. Taking place in the middle of the day, with the men at work, women and children were also disproportionately affected. Twenty-eight of the victims were younger than 10, a further 31 under 18, alongside 120 women.

Just one person in Stava survived the initial flow, having been down in her cellar; she died from her injuries seven days later. In Tesero, three kilometres down the valley, one woman was thrown 300 meters from her balcony. She was the only one from her family to live.



Damage in Tesero, close to the site of the Olympic cross-country stadium. Stava 1985 Foundation Archive

“It is a miracle that I am alive,” says Deflorian. “I was lucky, I was young and athletic. My brother was slightly behind me; he was buried up to his face in the mud. I wiped the mud off his face, he had a broken femur. It took help to get him out of the water, two of my cousins.

“And unfortunately, my father couldn’t save himself. I am here, he was left under the mudflow. We found the body two days later.”

Deflorian reaches down his collar with his right hand and pulls out a golden necklace, a cross on its end. “I still have the chain he was wearing,” he says. “It is my memory of my father.”



Clemente Deflorian, with his father’s necklace. Jacob Whitehead / The Athletic

Not everybody found their loved ones. Seventy-one of the bodies were unidentified, predominantly from Stava, unrecognisable from the violence of the flow.

They now lie in a communal grave in the San Leonardo cemetery, on a quiet hill on the western edge of Stava. A sculpture stands above, a woman and child, a father attempting to shield them, all engulfed by the wave.

“It was really by chance that we found my parents,” says Lucchi. “Really, by chance. The first bodies were brought to the school in Tesero, but the school was too small for so many of them. I spent all evening waiting. And then, at two o’clock in the morning, I recognised my parents.

“On the Saturday, I received their coffins. And that day, I told myself: ‘OK, now it is over.’ Our home was gone. I didn’t come back to Stava for six months. It hurt to come back. There was nothing to come back to.”



Lucchi's parents are buried in San Leonardo's graveyard. Jacob Whitehead / The Athletic

Some wanted to forget. Others wanted to remember. Lucchi was convinced to head the survivors' trust by his friend Romano Pojer, who lost both his wife and two children. Every day, for over a year, Pojer returned to the spot where his house once stood. He sat down on a stone, lost in his thoughts. It was difficult to move on, even once the dead were buried.

“We needed to understand what had happened,” says Lucchi, motioning behind his left shoulder, up toward the Prestavel Dam. “What happened was crazy. They didn’t care about us.”

There had been murmurs over the dam's safety for years. Owned by Montedison, one of the largest industrial companies in Italy, the Prestavel fluorite mine utilised what was technically known as a “tailings dam,” with two built directly on top of each other.

Built on marshy ground over 20 years earlier, permission was initially only granted for a nine-metre dam, but within eight years of its construction, both cleared 25 metres in height. Six months before the collapse, locals observed a small leak on the right flank of the northernmost dam. They were assured by Montedison that it was a minor issue; both dams were drained and repaired.

A public inquiry was launched immediately after the disaster, aided by the survivors' foundation. It found severe failings. An inspection carried out in 1974 had stated that the mine was at risk of imminent collapse. A decade later, the minor leak was the domino that sparked the inevitable.



*The two tailings dams above Stava, with the Prestavel Mine visible to the right of the picture.
Courtesy of the Stava 1985 Foundation Archive*

Amidst the wettest year on record for the valley, the spill had infused its earthen slopes with water. Investigators discovered that the subsequent repair had been botched, inadvertently destroying a drainage pump intended to relieve pressure on the retaining wall.

The disaster occurred four days after the dams were refilled. The retaining wall of the northern dam failed, its water bursting into its neighbour downslope, before both were swept away in the maelstrom. The wave, made up of 180,000 cubic metres of material, travelled towards Stava and Tesero at over 90 kilometers per hour.



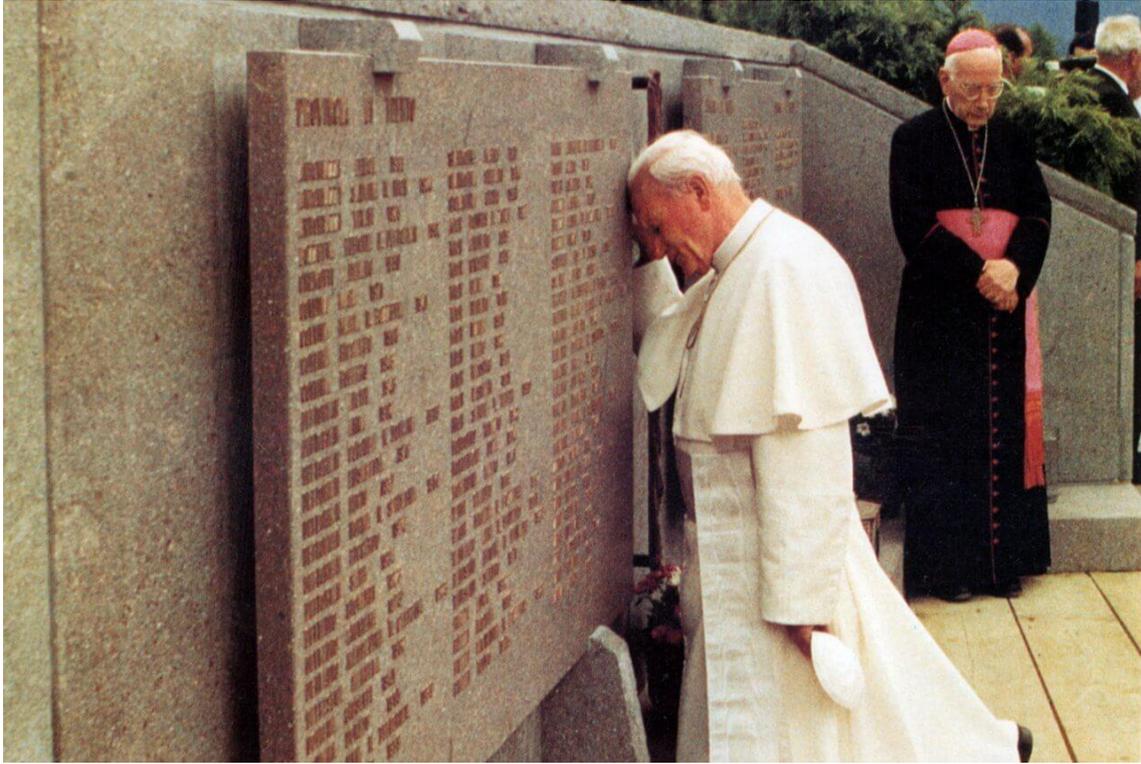
Repair work in the Stava Valley. Courtesy of the Stava 1985 Foundation Archive

“You have to understand, Montedison was the biggest chemical company in Italy,” says Lucchi. “They were so powerful. It was difficult for us to find experts who did not work for them in some capacity.

“Once, somebody linked with them called me, and he told me: ‘How could you build your homes under the dam?’ It was amazing. We were there first. But we were guilty because we were there. They tried to do everything to remove the memory. So this is why we built the foundation. This is why we are here.”

In 1988, three years after the tragedy, a criminal trial launched, with 10 managers and engineers on trial. Each would be found guilty of criminal negligence and multiple manslaughter.

The same year, Pope John Paul II visited, praying with the survivors at San Leonardo church. “That was very important to us,” Lucchi says.



Pope John Paul II visits the San Leonardo Cemetery. Courtesy of the Stava 1985 Foundation Archive

These events brought a sense of closure. Another brought a sense of rebirth. In the final months of the year, another kilometre down the valley, the first spade entered the soil south of Tesero. The town had always felt an affinity for cross-country skiing; in 1968, local boy Franco Nones won Olympic gold in Grenoble, France.

Just as the flood once shaped these slopes, men now carved the hillocks of the town’s stadium.

“I remember there used to be an old abandoned station there. I used to ski there as a child,” says Deflorian. Later, he credits his cross-country training with giving him the ability to sprint up the hill, outrunning the flood.

“But it was so important for us that it was reconstructed. We didn’t need a memory of the mud. We needed our foundation. But once that was there, we had the right to rebuild, to restart, to move forward.”

His cousin, Michele Longo, is now one of these Olympics’ teal-clad volunteers. Forty years ago, as a 17-year-old student, he was part of the rescue efforts. He remembers the legacy of his father, a volunteer firefighter. After the tragedy, Michele did not see him for seven days.

“We had the first ski world championships right here in Val di Fiemme in 1991,” Longo says. “And that was one of the events, right after the disaster, that saw the entire valley begin to restart. And now, at the Olympics, it’s so important for us to have so many volunteers. These have been wonderful days for Tesero, for our community. We want to work hard. We want to show the legacy that the flood has left us.” Back at the foundation’s centre, Lucchi powers up a desktop computer. He has kept a record of tailing dam collapses since 1985, organised into a spreadsheet, each input showing the size and casualties. There have been 128 accidents over the past 40 years, 21 in the United States alone.



The memorial sculpture in San Leonardo's cemetery. Jacob Whitehead / The Athletic

He shows footage from the Brumadinho dam disaster, a catastrophic failure from Brazil, in January 2019, which released 12 million cubic metres of material — over 60 times the size of Stava. In total, 270 were killed. Again, just as 40 years before, the mining company was found liable. Lucchi points to parallels between the disasters, to shortcuts taken by Montedison, building the dam on a marshy 25 per cent slope to save on transportation costs.

“We’re not ashamed of our history,” he says in conclusion, turning from the computer. “It’s something that happened. We just want to explain.”



The town of Tesero rises behind the grandstands overlooking the cross-country venue for the 2026 Olympics. Maddie Meyer / Getty Images

Deflorian agrees. “Remembering is important. Time erases memories, but logically, the Olympics being here are an opportunity to change that. And for us, the memory is not an end in itself, for us our testimony is an attempt to show you what happened.

“Events like the one we experienced continue every year, all over the world. We want people living near these basins to be careful, we want them to be vigilant.”

In the years since the disaster that killed his father, Deflorian has forged his life. He never considered leaving Tesero; now, he runs his own architecture practice in the town’s square. He motions through its sunlit front window, out towards the stadium and the Olympics beyond.

“We were once in the dirt,” he says. “But it is right that this is so. It means that activity can be reborn. It means that life can be reborn from mud.”