Book Review of “The Story of Vaiont Told by the Geologist Who Discovered the Landslide”

F. Guzzetti¹ and G. Lollino²

¹Istituto di Ricerca per la Protezione Idrogeologica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, via Madonna Alta 126, 06128 Perugia, Italy
²Istituto di Ricerca per la Protezione Idrogeologica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Strada delle Cacce 73, 10135 Torino, Italy

THE STORY OF VAIONT TOLD BY THE GEOL-
OGIST WHO DISCOVERED THE LANDSLIDE, BY:
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On 9 October 1963, at 10:39 p.m. local time, between 240
and 300 million cubic meters of sedimentary rocks detached
from Mount Toc, in Veneto, northern Italy, and slid into
the Vaiont Lake. The falling rock mass acted like a huge piston,
pushing the water of the lake against Casso and Erto, two
small villages on the slope in front of the slope that failed,
and then over an artificial dam 210 m high. A large wave
overtopped the dam and reached the town of Longarone at
10:46 p.m., destroying it. The dam did not fail and was only
marginally damaged. However, the landslide and the result-
ing flash flood killed at least 1921 people: seven at San Mar-
tino, at least 151 at Frasègno, le Spesse, Cristo, Pineda, Ceva,
Prada, Marzana, 54 at a construction camp near the dam, 109
in the town of Castelvazzano, and at least 1759 between the
town of Longarone and the area downstream along the Piave
River valley. News about the disaster went around the world;
the Herald Tribune titled: “Vaiont Dam: Warning Ignored”.

Before the catastrophic event, landslides had been identified
in the Vaiont valley by prominent investigators, but none had
anticipated the size and potential dynamics of this event.
This book is the story of the famous Vaiont landslide,
from the perspective of the geologist who was first to dis-
cover the landslide and who, following the disaster, spent
most of his career to investigate one of the most significant
landslide disasters ever experienced. The son of Carlo Se-
menza, the engineer who designed and built the Vaiont dam,
Edoardo Semenza, was the geologist who discovered the Va-

Correspondence to: F. Guzzetti
(f.guzzetti@irpi.cnr.it)

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University of Athens, uses the Vajont case study to demonstrate the importance of Engineering Geology to his students. Field trips are organized every year to the site of the Vajont landslide to show to students and practitioners the complex, and to a large extent poorly understood, relationships between geological setting, occurrence of the event, and the effects on the engineering structures. In Italy, the Vajont rockslide has conditioned the societal acceptance of dams and of other large engineering projects for decades. In the book, Semenza recognizes that “the studies about landslides that were conducted in those days were very superficial and, at least in Italy, an adequate school and a tradition of study regarding the subject did not exist”. The catastrophic landslide was a very hard way to discover our lack of understanding of a phenomenon – landsliding – which is recurrent and widespread in many areas of the world, and whose frequency, intensity, and impact can be highly conditioned by human actions.

At several places in the text, Semenza acknowledges his lack of understanding of the phenomena he was called to investigate. It is shown how his understanding improved through successive investigations, before and after the failure. As a young scientist (when he discovered the landslide he was 32-years old), he showed his findings coherently and presented his interpretation of the field evidence very clearly. Furthermore, he defended his interpretation courageously against his father (who at the beginning was sceptical, but then became supportive of his son’s interpretation and concerned about the potential consequences) and against the opinion of some of the leading scientists of the time, including Prof. Giorgio Dal Piaz, a renowned geologist, Prof. Leopold Müller, a pioneer of modern rock mechanics, and Prof. Francesco Penta, a leading geotechnical engineer. In this respect, the scientific conduct of Prof. Edoardo Semenza teaches an important lesson to all of us dealing with natural hazards and their consequences.

The book is the English edition of the Italian volume “La Storia del Vajont raccontata dal geologo che ha scoperto la frana”, published in 2001 by E. Semenza, one year before his death at the age of 76. The volume was translated and published in English with the contribution of the Fondazione Vajont, the Italian Federation of Geological Sciences (FIST), and the Italian National Group of the International Association of Engineering Geology and the Environment (IAEG). The book contains a wealth of valuable information on the Vajont landslide. More importantly, it represents tangible evidence Prof. Edoardo Semenza’s legacy of landslide studies and engineering geology. In their preface to the book, A. J. Hendron Jr. and F. D. Patton, two eminent scientists who published a well-known report on the Vajont landslide in 1985, write that “this excellent book should be required reading for all geotechnical engineers and engineering geologists”. We share their opinion, and we recommend the book to all young scientists and practitioners that study natural hazards and their potential societal and economic consequences.