As we listen to a tale, we recreate it in our own minds, detail by detail,” says storyteller Jay O’Callahan.

So when O’Callahan described to me a key scene in his story “Pouring the Sun,” I didn’t start out seeing Polish native Ludvika Waldony stirring potato soup on her 65th birthday and reminiscing about her life in a Pennsylvania steel town. Instead, my mind conjured up my grandmother, tending to the hot roux for her seafood gumbo and stretching the truth about my supposedly Navajo great-great grandmother.

O’Callahan tugged me back to Ludvika’s story: At the age of 17, she left Poland and journeyed to America. It was 1907, and the steel industry was thriving in Bethlehem, Pa., where Ludvika met and married Fritz, a steelworker. Their youngest son became a union activist; their eldest was killed in a truck accident. And Fritz — who loved to play the piano — lost three fingers in a steel-mill accident. Ludvika kept the family strong “so we could work the steel,” her children have attested. O’Callahan gleaned such details from three years’ research into the life and times of the people of Bethlehem.

Pouring the Sun” — a tale he was commissioned to do after the steel mills closed in Bethlehem — “is based on the lives and the language and the songs and the ordinary times of this family,” said O’Callahan in a recent interview. The Waldonys’ story is one of immigrants making a life in America, he explained.

“This is a story born of a community. These are the people who built the city.”

In his decades of storytelling — starting with tales told to entertain a younger brother and sister — O’Callahan had never been drawn to “the immigrants’ story. But I realized it’s everyone’s story.”

His own family came to America during Ireland’s Potato Famine, settling in Boston, O’Callahan recounted. But he has the storyteller’s frustration of knowing few details of the snippet of family history. Nonetheless, O’Callahan’s material draws from a wealth of childhood scenes and memories — such as breaking his glasses “all the time when I was six or seven, because I just didn’t want to wear them,” or hearing how his uncle’s new wife was spat upon during the days of World War II “because she looked Japanese.”

Childhood memories coalesced into O’Callahan’s “Pill Hill Stories” — so named because his neighborhood was home to lots of doctors (his parents were teachers who “had no money, but they had a talent for buying mansions on the cheap,” O’Callahan revealed in a Detroit Free Press interview.)