

Israeli hospitality

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

In sixth-grade Hebrew class, Eli Schorr teased Efrat Altshul to the point of tears.

"He's only doing that because he likes you," the principal explained to the distraught girl, and he'd bribe Eli with chocolates to leave Efrat alone. "It didn't work, but Eli did manage to get my attention," Efrat recalls, now that she can laugh about her husband's youthful mischief. "So when we got engaged, we gave the principal chocolates."

Both Efrat and Elli grew up in religious Zionist homes in Silver Spring, Maryland. By the time of their engagement at age 20, they were already planning on aliya. In fact, Elli was in the midst of a five-year course of study at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shvut, the Gush Etzion town where they live today with their five children. The first three of their married years were spent there, until going back to Silver Spring to prepare educationally for the permanent move.

Both have undergraduate degrees from Yeshiva University. Elli earned a law degree at Georgetown University, and worked in Jewish education and in marketing for his father's company, Spirit Airlines, as it was expanding across the country. Efrat earned her doctorate in developmental psychology at the University of Maryland.

When they made aliya in 2005, they were accompanied by Efrat's maternal grandparents, "longtime Zionists ready for the next step in their lives." All of Efrat's five younger siblings also have moved to Israel, as well as two of Elli's three siblings. His parents live in Jerusalem half the year.

Efrat's grandfather died two years ago, but her grandmother, Beverly Marks, now 89, lives a few blocks away and is part of their everyday lives, especially on Shabbat. "She is a remarkable person and has found great artistic inspiration in Israel," says Efrat.

Diving into the tea business

In February 2013, the Schorrs took a daring plunge by acquiring Cérémonie Tea, a 10-year-old company based in Migdal Ha'emek.

"We took our really diverse backgrounds and experiences and decided to go into business together," says Efrat.

Why tea? "We saw this product and knew it had a lot of potential," says Elli. "There is not a lot of premium tea available here in Israel, and we got good responses abroad as well."

Cérémonie Tea sells about 50 products based on 12 flavors of bagged and loose tea. Working with the Israel Export Institute, in the past year they have been building up their presence in

the foreign market by getting distributors to sell their products to stores and restaurants.

"We went from no exports to 20 percent exports this year, and next year we will move closer to 40 to 50 percent exports," says Elli. "In Israel, we sell mostly in specialty shops, health-food stores, hotels and restaurants."

Efrat notes that becoming business owners decisively put an end to their "new immigrant" days. Though they maintain a five-person office in Alon Shvut, they commute two hours each way to the Migdal factory, where they oversee a production team of about 15, including Israeli-born Jews and Arabs as well as immigrants from India, Russia, Ethiopia and Morocco.

"We left our Anglo, English-speaking bubble," says Efrat, who took courses at a MATI Small Business Development Center run by the Israel Small and Medium Enterprises Authority. Most of their workers and local service providers don't speak English, and the cultural differences sometimes came as a surprise, like when the Schorrs discovered that their factory workers depended on them to provide lunch every day.

"We're a little exotic to them and they appreciate our values," says Efrat. "If we say we're going to pay, we do. It's been a positive learning experience for all of us."

Elli explains that they have not moved the factory closer to home "because we have a whole business ecosystem in Migdal Ha'emek. We've integrated into the local business community there — local machine repairmen, drivers, printers. Most of our day is speaking and writing in Hebrew, from emails to contracts. This is where my training as a lawyer has come in handy."

The only time Efrat's Hebrew fails her is when someone starts yelling at her. "I either get flustered or start shouting back in English! I can't fight in Hebrew; they didn't teach us that in day school," she says with a laugh.

Avid travelers

Married for 20 years, the couple's two boys and three girls range in age from six to 19. Their oldest son studies at Yeshivat Har Etzion; their 17- and 13-year-old daughters attend Horev in Jerusalem; their 10-year-old son is starting fifth grade; and their "baby" is getting ready for first grade.

The family keeps track of its Israeli travels with pins on a wall map, and they recently took a trip to Finnish Lapland.

The tea business gives the Schorrs a chance to indulge that passion for worldwide travel. They have participated in trade shows, demos and expos in Ethiopia, Las Vegas, Paris and Germany.

"It looks like Taiwan is next," says



EFRAT AND ELLI SCHORR, 41 FROM SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND, TO ALON SHVUT, 2005

Efrat. "I couldn't believe Taiwanese buyers wanted tea, because it grows in their backyard. But they're interested in our herbals and black teas, which grow in India."

When Asian companies ask them what tea has to do with Israel, they respond that the Jewish state sits at the modern crossroads of the ancient spice routes. "We bring the leaves and spices from all over the world and blend them here in Israel so we can share the hospitality of tea," Efrat explains. "Just like the spice routes allowed people to share ideas and cultures, Israel was always a meeting and blending place."

She also sees Israel as a place where people take extraordinary responsibility for one another. "People here are incredibly caring and sensitive and always rise to the occasion, even going to the funeral of total strangers. But we don't wave the flag and bang the drum that everyone has to move to Israel. Your heart has to be in it and you have to know it's where you belong so that the bumps in the road are just bumps in the road, because it's home."

Elli says he very much appreciates their good fortune in arriving with family and a good education, and settling into a community where they felt comfortable. "My grandparents were all immigrants to the United States and I see how much easier it is for us as new immigrants to Israel, coming not out of despair but out of choice and a sense of belonging." ■

THESE TWO middle-school sweethearts have been together through geographical and professional changes. (Courtesy)